

# The Tribune Democrat, Johnstown, PA

*August 11, 2013*

## Does Pa. law need more teeth to deal with dog attacks?

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HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania's much-ballyhooed 2009 revision to the dog law, which principally focused on cracking down on puppy mills, also included language spelling out how dogs can be deemed dangerous by district judges.

But investigators in the state Auditor General's Office found that in practice only a fraction of the dogs involved in attacks in the state end up on the dangerous dog registry.

Owners of dangerous dogs are supposed to pay a \$500 annual fee and have conspicuous warning signs posted at their homes. Registered owners of dangerous dogs are required to have least \$50,000 in liability insurance to cover any damage the dogs might cause.

The law also says that the state has the right to conduct follow-up inspections to see if the dogs are being kept in appropriate enclosures.

However, the law does not mandate those inspections.

Auditors found that nearly one-quarter of the owners of state-registered dangerous dogs failed to get an annual license required as a condition of keeping the animals and that the dog law enforcement bureau had done nothing to crack down on the scofflaws.

“Department officials admitted to us that they have been lax in enforcing the dangerous dog requirements of the law,” the report says.

“Furthermore, department officials admitted that its list of dangerous dogs is likely incomplete since it contains only 65 dogs statewide.”

Data provided by the Department of Agriculture shows state dog wardens responded to 1,100 dog attacks last year.

Thomas Newell, a personal injury attorney who specializes in dog bites, said the reports to state dog wardens are only the tip of the iceberg. Many dog attacks are investigated by police or local authorities. Pennsylvania does not require police to report dog bite complaints to the state Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement.

Newell said that the stringent requirements for keeping dangerous dogs, plus the penalties if a registered dangerous dog ever attacks again, deter almost all owners from seeking to have animals placed on the registry.

Because of that, many dogs involved in attacks are euthanized, but the record-keeping about exactly how each case is resolved is not compiled by the Agriculture Department, a spokeswoman said

State dog wardens contacted for this report said that as state employees, they are barred from speaking to the media and referred questions to the Agriculture Department offices in Harrisburg.

“Every situation is investigated. It’s case by case. We look at every case – (and consider) the extent of injuries and circumstances,” department spokeswoman Samantha Krepps said.

Asked to explain how the agency determines which of the dogs that bit people last year were truly dangerous, Krepps said dog law enforcement staff follow the state’s dangerous dog law, which says “if a dog attacks a person, the person (or anyone acting on his/her behalf), the state dog warden or a police officer may file a complaint with a magisterial district justice charging the owner or keeper with harboring a dangerous dog.”

But district judges contacted by the newspaper said they rarely get dog bite complaints and that most problems are resolved by the dog warden before they get to

court.

District Judge Jeff Mensch, who serves western Union County, said he gets about one dog bite complaint a year. Mensch said he doesn't think he has ever been asked to designate a dog as dangerous for the state registry.

Data provided by the state confirms that. Union County is one of the 37 counties in the state with zero dogs on the dangerous dog registry. There were 21 dog bites in Union County reported to the dog warden in 2012 and eight so far this year, Agriculture Department data show.

Northumberland County had 113 dog bites reported in 2012, the second-highest total reported by any Pennsylvania county.

The data is skewed because the Agriculture Department had virtually no reports of dog bites from larger metropolitan areas. Just one dog bite was reported in Allegheny County and only two dog bites in Philadelphia.

Better record-keeping of all reports of dog bites, regardless of which agency receives the complaint, would help document animals known to be dangerous, Newell said.

Many complaints, particularly in cities, go to local police officers who feel they are too busy dealing with conventional crime to want to get bogged down in trying to prove that a dog is dangerous, Newell said.