

Sunday Column – Unintended Consequences

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What seems like a no brainer to some of us isn't that at all. We don't always know what other people are up against and our judgement may be unfairly harsh. No one likes to see a tethered dog, but what we don't know is the whole story.

Tethered dogs may suffer horrific consequences, which include losing a leg that has been wrapped in a chain for several hours; hanging by the neck; or becoming so aggressive that he is no longer safe to keep as a pet. These dogs are left outside and alone to languish in bitter cold and suffocating heat and humidity.

But stop and put yourself in the place of a dog owner who chains his dog outside. Let's say he doesn't have a fenced yard and his dog tears up his rental home after he goes to work. He can't afford doggie day care and he has nowhere else to take his dog during work hours. What would you do in this situation?

The options available to someone in this predicament are precious few. He might relinquish his dog to animal control in the vain hope of a better home. He might turn the dog loose while he is away.

Believe it or not these folks love their pets the same as any of us. They may have a great lifestyle that includes fun activities with their dogs during their free hours.

Every once in a while there is a new state legislative bill or city ordinance that puts restrictions on tethering. My initial gut reaction is to strongly support these kinds of rules. However, I've heard the flip side of the argument from a group you would not expect to hold such views, and that is the animal welfare community.

Tethering laws create unintended consequences such as mass relinquishments resulting in mass euthanasia in already swamped animal control facilities. In reality, you can't just shake your finger at someone and they instantly correct their animal keeping habits.

This topic came up at an animal welfare coalition meeting recently when we heard about a recent push by a well-meaning citizen in western Georgia who wants to see local ordinances enacted to restrict tethering. It turns out these laws result in an enforcement nightmare for municipal governments who have to cite owners and ultimately seize their animals when they don't, or can't comply. When these animals come into shelters there may not be enough room to hold them for adoption. Nobody who loves animals anticipates this outcome when they root for tethering laws.

It takes a pile of money and a corps of passionate, creative and dedicated volunteers to create a happier ending. One such organized effort is the Coalition to Unchain Dogs. There are many other groups across the country changing outcomes for loved dogs who just need a better containment system to stay in their home.

According to their website the Coalition to Unchain Dogs, "improves the welfare of dogs living in under-served communities as well as dogs continuously chained outdoors by offering information and free services including wellness care, spay/neuter, vaccinations and fences. By providing nonjudgmental

assistance and building relationships within the community, the Coalition to Unchain Dogs bolsters connections between dogs and their human companions.”

A home doesn't have to be perfect to be good. Many of us in animal welfare are rethinking how we judge people and their pets in order to preserve more lives. The scourge of pet overpopulation is slowly loosening its hold on Columbus, Georgia but we are not out of the woods yet.

If those who would like to legislate particular treatment of animals would put some of their energy toward making conditions better in under-served communities this would go a very long way to making our world a better place for animals.

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