



# Issue Analysis: Why Mandatory Spay/Neuter Laws are Ineffective

No dog should ever go unloved or unwanted. Stories of dogs being relinquished to shelters break the hearts of every dog lover.

These issues are the result of a variety of causes. National research organizations have reported that the majority of unwanted dogs in the United States come from owners who are unable or unwilling to train, socialize, and care for their dogs.

As part of encouraging responsible dog ownership, the American Kennel Club (AKC) urges pet owners to spay and neuter their dogs if they do not want to participate in AKC dog shows or performance events or use them in a responsible breeding program. The AKC supports public education programs that teach future pet-buyers and help current

mandatory sterilization policies.

## Identifying the Problem

Although MSN may sound like a logical solution to the problem of unwanted dogs, they only address a symptom of the problem. A truly effective solution will require addressing this larger issue.

National studies and anecdotal experiences of shelters across the country demonstrate that economics also plays a significant role in animal relinquishment. Unemployment, tighter budgets, and other monetary concerns including unexpected relocation all contribute to families to giving up pets.

As communities recognize that there are irresponsible dog owners who do not properly train their dogs and who allow

basic animal control laws they are already tasked with enforcing.

Many communities that enact MSN laws find that enforcement can be expensive. A mandatory spay/neuter law enacted in Dallas, Texas, in 2008 resulted in a 22 percent increase in animal control expenditures, as well as an overall decrease in licensing projected to reduce revenue by \$400,000. The City of Santa Cruz, California, experienced a 56% cost increase over the first 12 years of implementation. The City of Los Angeles' budget ballooned from \$6.7 million to \$18 million following implementation. Similar increases in animal control costs following the establishment of mandatory spay/neuter laws have been experienced in communities

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BULLDOG- ISABELLE FRANCAIS FOR AKC

dog owners understand the great responsibility that comes with dog ownership.

Some policymakers and groups assert that the solution is mandatory spay/neuter (MSN) laws. The AKC disagrees. Unlike voluntary programs, mandatory spay/neuter laws have proven to be ineffective. Numerous studies have found they result in significant cost increases and many other unintended consequences for responsible dog owners, local shelters, and the community at large – *without addressing the real underlying issue of irresponsible dog ownership.*

For these reasons, the American Kennel Club is joined by numerous organizations including the American Veterinary Medical Association, the National Animal Interest Alliance, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in opposing

their dogs to roam or otherwise create a nuisance, it becomes increasingly evident that most problems stem from owner irresponsibility. Mandatory spay/neuter laws will not address these problems; however, they will punish law-abiding citizens who wish to keep an intact animal, while those who already neglect their responsibilities will likely continue that behavior.

## Unintended Consequences

Mandatory spay/neuter laws also have a tendency to create problems for communities because they are very difficult to enforce and can be easily evaded by avoiding dog licensing.

MSN laws also greatly increase the workload for animal control officers, who must now also verify the sterilization of residents' pets in addition to the

throughout the country from Colorado to North Carolina to Washington.

Mandatory spay/neuter policies prove expensive for the public as well. When these laws are established, many cities find that their publicly-funded low-cost spay/neuter programs cannot meet the demand, which forces dog owners to pay full price for the procedure. This can be a huge financial burden for low-income dog owners, who may ultimately be forced to choose between harboring an illegal unsterilized dog and turning it over to a shelter because they cannot afford the procedure.

Unintended broader public health and safety consequences should also be considered. The American Veterinary Medical Association's "Dog and Cat Population Control" policy notes that the mandatory nature of these laws may

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result in pet owners avoiding rabies vaccinations and other general veterinary care in order to hide their lack of compliance.

Another disturbing trend arises when these laws prevent responsible breeders from being able to breed and raise quality family pets. Nearly one out of every two families in the United States has a dog. This generates a significant demand for well-bred puppies. Responsible breeders are committed to raising healthy purebred dogs and provide the opportunity for local residents to purchase a quality dog from an expert in the breed who is also knowledgeable about the needs, temperament, and background of the puppy offered for sale. These breeders help potential new owners understand the breed and ensure that a prospective buyer is a good lifestyle fit with the new puppy.

If responsible breeders are forced out of business, those who wish to purchase a purebred dog are forced to seek other avenues. This may include buying puppies over the Internet, where the dogs may be imported from countries with fewer health and safety standards than the United States. Anecdotal evidence has shown a significant increase in the number of dogs being transported into the country, with little to no veterinary oversight and care before the dogs are given to the new owners. A number of these dogs have become seriously ill with diseases such as rabies that are dangerous to both the dog and humans.

### Why Exemptions Aren't Enough

Sometimes, instead of an outright spay/neuter mandate, lawmakers will opt to enact laws with stricter regulations on those who choose to not sterilize their dogs. Intact animal permits and differential licensing require those who choose not to sterilize their dogs to obtain a license that is often significantly more expensive than those for sterilized dogs. Some communities do not require licenses unless a dog is intact. Other policies provide exemptions for owners whose dogs are listed with a nationally-recognized registry.

These policies, including exemptions,

punish responsible dog owners simply because they choose to own an intact dog. Responsible dog breeders and owners have a right to own an intact dog if they so choose without being subject to regulations beyond those of other dog owners.



SOFT-COATED WHEATEN TERRIER- MARY BLOOM © AKC

**“Public education about responsible dog ownership improves public safety, reduces economic burdens on a community, and preserves the rights of dog owners – all while helping dog owners learn how to care for their pets.”**

The AKC encourages dog owners to sterilize their pets unless they wish to participate in responsible breeding programs, performance events, or AKC conformation dog shows. As conformation shows are ultimately designed to judge the quality of breeding stock, all dogs entered into these events must be intact. Mandatory spay/neuter defeats the whole purpose of traditional dog shows!

Some laws offer exemptions to MSN policies for “show dogs”. However, this exemption misses the point that spaying/neutering should be an individual decision made by an owner, not forced by the state. It is also very difficult to prove whether or not a dog is being kept for exhibition. Some mandatory spay/neuter schemes require a dog to be shown at least once a year in order to be exempted from the sterilization policies, but not all breeders show all their dogs every year. In addition, many breeders choose to breed their female show dogs after they have finished showing them to their championships. Other owners may choose to see how a dog develops before making a decision about whether to show

the dog. There are many valid reasons for an exhibitor not to show a dog every year, and this choice should be respected.

### What's the Solution?

Targeting the issue of irresponsible ownership is the best solution for addressing dog-related issues in a community. This begins with gathering data about the extent and nature of a possible problem in a community. Does the community have reliable statistics on unowned or unwanted animal populations? Does the community currently have comprehensive animal control statutes to address at-large dogs, nuisance dogs, and stray animals? If so, how are they enforced?

Does enforcement include appropriate fines and penalties? Does the community need additional support to enforce these laws? If existing laws are not being followed or enforced, then adding more laws will not improve the situation.

Communities may also want to consider encouraging private organizations to provide/subsidize low-cost

spay/neuter clinics to help give low-income individuals the opportunity to sterilize their dogs if they wish.

One of the most effective ways to ensure compliance is through strong public education programs. These programs cover the basics of responsible dog ownership and local dog laws. The American Kennel Club has a wealth of materials to help shelters, community organizations, schools, and other public organizations educate the public about responsible dog ownership. The AKC also provides resources through thousands of local kennel clubs, located in all 50 states, who are willing to assist local leaders in designing and implementing positive canine education programs.

Addressing irresponsible dog ownership through strict enforcement of animal control laws and strong public education programs are effective and cost-efficient ways to address animal control issues. Public education about responsible dog ownership improves public safety, reduces economic burdens on a community, and preserves the rights of responsible caring dog owners – all while helping dog owners learn how to care for their pets.