

Transcript of Press Conference Regarding Dog Attacks on Guide Dogs

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Antonette Sorrick, Board Executive Officer (Emcee): Good morning. Thank you all for coming today. My name is Antonette Sorrick and I am Executive Officer of the California State Board of Guide Dogs for the Blind. The State Board was created in 1948 to license guide dog schools and guide dog instructors and to protect guide dog users. We are here today to raise awareness about dog attacks on guide dogs. Recently there have been two attacks that have received world-wide attention. In London, a guide dog suffered a vicious attack by an unleashed dog. And last month, in Australia, a dog attack on a guide dog caused the owner to become disoriented and fall off a pier, fracturing his spine. He is in a coma. There are many other incidents of attacks on guide dogs that don't get the media's attention, yet they have a serious impact on the lives of the victims. In fact, this morning we will hear from a guide dog user with first-hand experience with a dog attack.

First, let me say that we need to make an important distinction: guide dogs are not pets, they are assistance dogs. Dog attacks on guide dogs do more than inflict physical and emotional pain on the dog and its human partner. A guide dog that has suffered an attack may not be able to work for months or sometimes they have to be retired from service altogether. And that's not all. If a guide dog cannot return to service after an attack, the financial loss is considerable. It costs 60,000 dollars to raise, train, and provide veterinary care for a guide dog, and the wait for a new guide dog can be six months or longer. Fortunately, in San Francisco dog attacks are taken very seriously by the San Francisco Police Department, which has full-time officers responding to such attacks. Two police officers are here today to talk about what the Department is doing with regards to attacks on guide dogs.

But first we'll hear from a victim of an attack. I would like to welcome Theresa Duncan and her guide dog, Dario. Theresa is the Alumni Director for Guide Dogs for the Blind. She has worked in the field of blind rehabilitation for over 20 years and currently serves as President Elect for the Board of Directors for the Northern California Association of Educators and Rehabilitators for the Visually Impaired.

Theresa Duncan, Alumni Director, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.: Thank you Antonette and thank you for the board for putting this together; I believe that this is an important issue. I'm just going to tell you a little bit about my

experience with a dog attack. I was living here in the city of San Francisco. This was a few years ago. I was walking my guide dog Blossom. She was a yellow lab female guide dog; she was about five years old. We were walking to a local park so she could relieve in the morning and I was about to take off her harness so she could take care of her business. Out of nowhere an unleashed Pit-bull dog ran up to her, grabbed onto her neck with his jaws, and began to shake my dog. She started to sort of as a dog screams if you have never heard that sound it is a horrible, horrible, painful sound. Me being visually impaired I couldn't see where she had come from or if there was anyone with her. Her handler did come up and we both tried in vain to have the dog release its grip on my Blossom. It was useless. I then called, "no," screamed for someone to call the police and a couple of neighbors came out. One neighbor came out finally with a hockey stick. He took the stick and sort of pried it between the jaws of the attacking dog and was able to pry the dog off the neck of my dog. Right about the same time, the police had arrived and were able to sort of sequester the bad dog and help me out. The police were amazing here in San Francisco.

We're fortunate to have the Vicious and Dangerous Dog Unit with Sergeant Herndon and Officer Denny who were able to kind of make sure that my situation was processed correctly. The officers who responded to the incident took me and Blossom to the vet. She had to stay at the vet overnight and had stitches along her neck, several stitches; I actually sustained a small bite and had to go to the doctor to get a tetanus shot- which was not any fun. Afterwards, the incident was treated as though I was attacked through the San Francisco Police Department which made a big difference. The attacking dog was rounded up and kenneled. It was given some behavioral tests and then we had a hearing. At which time the owners of the dog had to make sure that the dog got some training, was never out without a muzzle and, other different types of stipulations put on the dog to make sure that it would never do something like this again.

Unfortunately, that's just one of many incidences. That happen to be the worst incident that happened to me, but I have had several times just walking down the streets of many different cities where dogs are either left tied to a pole or with a person and the dog is really interfering with my ability to navigate and to get around. This can really mess with a person's orientation when your dog is distracted. It's like someone grabbing hold of your steering wheel while driving. It's a very dangerous situation. Fortunately for Blossom, she was rehabilitated physically and we did some work with her through Guide Dogs of the Blind, getting her rehabilitated psychologically to work again and not to be afraid of other dogs. Unfortunately, she passed away a few months after the attack from an unknown cause; she had been a perfectly healthy dog up to that point. We're not sure. It's my personal opinion that the attack might have been a big enough

stress to have caused her some physical problems that weren't showing up prior to that, but that's certainly just my opinion not a vet's opinion.

The affect that it had on me? I was afraid to go out. I would hear the jingle of a dog collar and would just stiffen up and I know that has been something that has affected other dogs that I have worked with; because I have had this horrible traumatic situation happen. So over the years I have sort of worked myself through it and I'm okay now, but just the affects of such a small time just a few seconds a whole world can change. So if there is anything people can do to please keep your dogs on a leash don't allow them to interfere with the work of service dogs that, makes a huge difference in the lives of many people. So thank you.

Antonette, Board EO (Emcee): Thank you, Theresa. Now, I would like to introduce Sergeant William Herndon and Officer John Denny of the San Francisco Police Department. Sergeant William Herndon is a thirty-three year veteran of the San Francisco Police Department. In 1993, he became the hearing officer for Vicious and Dangerous Dog Court. Due to the volume of aggressive dog related complaints and after acting as hearing officer for the case in which a San Francisco resident was mauled to death by a dog, Sergeant Herndon now deals full time with aggressive dog issues. The Vicious Dog Unit has worked extensively with Guide Dogs for the Blind to create a national model for dealing with dog attacks to guide dog teams. Sergeant Herndon received the Ethel Bender Award from Guide Dog Users Inc. for service to the guide dog community.

Officer John Denny is a twenty-five year veteran of the San Francisco Police Department. He has been working with Vicious and Dangerous Dog Court since 1991. Officer Denny has worked with Sergeant Herndon in developing and implementing a hearing process for dogs who engaged in vicious or menacing behavior. Through Sergeant Herndon's and Officer John Denny's efforts, "Bite and Run" legislation was enacted in 2006, which makes it a misdemeanor for a person whose dog has bitten a person or domestic animal to flee the scene without identifying oneself. The following year a similar ordinance was enacted for California as a whole.

Sergeant William Herndon: Hi, Good morning. I'm Sergeant Bill Herndon with the San Francisco Police department and this is my partner John Denny. We are the Vicious and Dangerous Dog Unit. We have worked together on dog issues probably for over 20 years, but for the past 8 years we have worked on dog issues full time. A number of years ago - I do vicious dog hearings - there was a request from a guide dog team where a guide dog had been attacked; this was the first incident such as this that I had been made aware of. Officer Denny did some investigation on it and we had the hearing at City Hall. Guide Dogs for the

Blind - the victim had been a graduate of their school - they sent an advocate over to help educate me as to the ramifications of a guide dog being attacked. We were both fortunate enough to be taken over to San Rafael. We saw the facility, we were blindfolded, and we were given the opportunity and the privilege to walk with these wonderful dogs. Afterwards, we understood a little bit better what the problems were. When we have hearings I'm able to do nothing or everything up to having a dog humanely euthanized. I can order restrictions that I feel will make it safe for the public in the future. Guide dog attacks in the past, I have heard and have come to understand, have not been taken seriously. I think it is a lack of understanding from either the animal control officers and or the police officers, but one thing I need to make very clear is that it is a crime. If a guide dog is attacked, if a working team is interfered with it's not an animal control issue – it's an animal control issue for dealing with the dog - but it is a police issue for dealing with the person that should be in control of the animal that has committed the offense. There are a number of penal code sections and local municipal sections that would apply to this.

Officer John Denny: In San Francisco it is now the police department's policy to impound the attacking dog or the dog that is interfering with a guide dog. In the past responding officers might of thought that this was a Animal Care and Control issue or something not to be dove into too deeply, but we have been working very strenuously to make sure that police officers do allot the proper amount of attention to something like this and that the offending dog is taken in to custody.

Sergeant William Herndon: That does not mean taking the dog in custody necessarily for a long period of time. Sometimes we have taken a dog into custody and released the dog later that day. But, any time there is an incident with a dog and a working team if that dog has in any way presented any offense at all the dog is to be impounded. The reason we made the model is because too many times we have had a animal control officer come out to a scene and say "Oh the dog seems like a nice friendly dog" or a police officer would come out and say "That it is not a big deal," not understanding that is a big deal and that we need to have this taken seriously. We also found that by instituting a policy where the dog is impounded that the word gets out pretty quickly not to let your dog interfere with a working team. We have had to do that I believe five times in the last year and a half and we have never had any repeats of that dog or any other dogs in that area. So, we feel that it is a very effective tool for getting the word out to the public. We would be happy to show any law enforcement agency in the country our model. We would be happy to show them what we do. I'd like to explain to them why it's such a serious thing and it not only affects working teams but it affects all people that are walking their dogs. It's a public safety issue and it really is something that needs to be taken seriously.

Antonette, Board EO (Emcee): Thank you, Sergeant Herndon and Officer Denny. The work you do is very important and very much appreciated. Now, I would like to introduce to you Brian Francis, Director of Admissions and Graduate Services at Guide Dogs for the Blind, Incorporated, in San Rafael. Before joining Guide Dogs for the Blind in the United Kingdom, Brian was a police Constable in Bristol, England. In 1973, he left law enforcement to become a guide dog instructor. In 1999, Brian joined Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. Brian? The text above is you and below is Brian.

Brian Francis, Director of Admissions and Graduate Services, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.: Good morning, I would like to start by adding my thanks to the State Board of Guide Dogs in California for raising the awareness of the problem of dog attacks. You've heard from an individual who underwent an attack unfortunately, Theresa, and from the San Francisco Police Department which is way ahead of most other police departments in the country as far as dealing with aggressive and vicious dogs. The problem unfortunately is not just within San Francisco and California. Several years ago, a survey was carried out by a consumer group of guide dog users nationally called the Guide Dog Users International, and the results of that survey showed that 42% of all guide dog handlers that responded had experienced a form of attack on their guide dog by another dog, but a much higher rate of 82% had experienced interference which had created a problem for the guide dog working team and this is nationally across the U.S. Even more disturbing, 85% of attacks occurred in a public right-of-way. In some cases there was physical injury to the guide "dog". In other cases there was not physical injury but the incident was significant enough to traumatize both dog and handler. In some cases, the handler, the dog, or both were so impacted by the incidents that they experienced fear about going out and living their lives and traveling freely in their communities. Unfortunately, emergency calls related to attacks on guide dogs are frequently treated as a low priority crime. These types of calls may be directed to Animal Care and Control instead of police response.

While these incidents do involve dogs, it is an extremely unfortunate and inadequate response in this situation. Attacks or interference from a dog towards a Guide Dog team result in trauma for the dog user and the dog. A user may become fearful of a repeat attack when hearing other dogs on the street and transfer their concern through to the dog which in turn, can negatively affect the guide dog's confidence. Such confidence issues may result in a need for a direct visit from a staff member of the guide dog school to assess and support the team. An assessment may result in the dog being returned to the guide dog school for an extended evaluation and retraining program. Such action would deny the guide dog user the availability of their primary mobility aid for the duration of the retraining period. Any injury to the dog or user may result in a

loss of the independence and mobility that a guide dog provides. Serious physical or emotional trauma may lead to the retirement of the dog. The impact may also include financial implications. Veterinary costs for treatment of injuries sustained by the guide dog may be very high and require financial outlay for the guide dog user and the guide dog school. If the guide dog needs to retire, the cost of providing a replacement guide dog will be approximately \$65,000.00. Injuries sustained by the guide dog user may likewise involve medical expenses and loss of earnings.

There are currently State and City laws (Civil and Penal Code) that protect Guide Dogs for the Blind and the handler against molestation and attacks. These laws validate the rights of guide dog handlers to equal protection under the law, regardless of whether they or their dog is attacked. Animal Care and Control agencies do a commendable job in all areas of their challenging work. However, in emergency situations involving a guide dog team, many ACC agencies are understaffed and unable to respond in a prompt manner, to assist a team after a savage attack. Also, many ACC officers do not have the statutory authority to conduct a criminal investigation or enforce the Penal Code. Guide Dog handlers deserve the right to call 911 and receive prompt attentive response from their local law enforcement agency. Documentation of a crime committed against a blind or visually impaired handler and their guide dog needs to be recorded by the investigating officer. A formal police report is a critical tool to track repeat offender dogs and irresponsible handlers.

Guide Dog Schools in collaboration with blind and visually impaired consumer groups have produced educational material for police departments and animal control agencies. This material can be used by some police agencies to provide continuing education credits for police officers. This educational material describes the need for law enforcement and protecting service dog users from attack. Copies may be obtained from Guide Dogs Users International or from Guide Dogs for the Blind. We strongly support law enforcement programs such as the San Francisco Vicious Dog Unit which investigates and takes swift action when a service dog is attacked. Guide Dogs for the Blind also support, and distribute, educational material regarding 'Responsible Pet Ownership'. Besides laws, owners who train their dogs and maintain control at all times are much less likely to encounter aggressive or disruptive behaviors from their dogs.

Antonette Sorrick, Board Executive Officer (Emcee): Thank you, Brian. I would like to thank all of the speakers today, the San Francisco Office of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Board President Jeff Neidich, Board Member Eric Holm, and Frank Welte, California Council of the Blind for attending.