

## City Sending 'Aggressive' Dogs to be Adopted, Records Show

By Brian Collister | June 1, 2016

AUSTIN (KXAN) -- The City of Austin has laws to protect you and your family from dangerous and vicious dogs that could attack and injure someone. But we've discovered, sometimes the city allows those dangerous dogs to go up for adoption.

The city has a formal agreement to send stray dogs to Austin Pets Alive (APA), a non-profit no-kill shelter. When the city was negotiating that contract in 2011, it originally said the city's shelter would not hand over dogs with a documented history of aggression to the animal rescue group. But that line was deleted and didn't make the final contract approved by council. When pressed for answers from the city as to why that line was omitted, no one can explain the final decision.

KXAN also discovered the city is actively giving dangerous dogs to APA.

We first met a dog named Max in February when we went undercover with a hidden camera inside APA. Max is described on APA's website as having a "sweet demeanor." But it wasn't until we got to the shelter where we were warned Max could possibly bite. During the visit, a representative from APA said Max can "sometimes [have] outwardly aggressive behavior...biting someone. Coming toward someone to bite."

Now, city records obtained by KXAN reveal what we didn't know back then. When Max first arrived at the city shelter in February of 2013, staff noted his "serious aggression." Despite that, he was given to APA to be adopted out.

Since then, Max has been shuffled back and forth between the city shelter and APA for biting multiple times. In December of 2013, a potential owner was petting Max behind his ears when the dog suddenly leaped up and snapped, drawing blood. For a second time, Max was quarantined in the city shelter, as required by city ordinance. After both bites, the city sent him back to APA, where he's been for the past three years, still waiting to be adopted.

Max is one of more than 500 dogs quarantined for biting, which the city then transferred to APA in the last five years, according to city records. More than 200 of those dogs appear to meet the city's own definition of a dangerous dog: attacking unprovoked and causing injuries. In at least 40 of those attacks, city staff said the person received moderate to severe injuries. Hundreds more dogs are noted in city records as "aggressive" but were still given to APA.

The veterinarian who runs APA, Ellen Jefferson, has not responded to requests for an interview about the new findings. Back in February she said, "The tricky part is that we don't know what the dog is going to do in the future. It is impossible for us to predict."

Maverick, a German Shepherd, was surrendered to the city by his owner after he says his dog was snapping and biting--it is known where he originally acquired Maverick. While at the Austin Animal Center, a man who said he could handle the dog adopted him but proceeded to bring the dog back less than one month later stating Maverick attacked his friend. Maverick was then sent to APA where he bit someone who was considering adopting him. Even after two recorded bites, he was adopted out a second time by APA. Records do not show if there have been any incidents with Maverick since then.

So why would the city let a potentially dangerous dog be adopted? In 2011, with the goal of becoming a "no kill" city, the city promised to euthanize no more than 10 percent of the animals in its care.

The city's Chief Animal Services Officer, Tawny Hammond, refused an interview for this story. In February, she explained how the city determines which dogs are sent to APA and which dogs are euthanized.

"What is it in those cases that made you take that choice?" asked KXAN Investigator Brian Collister.

"It has to be an immediate threat to public safety," Hammond responded. "Something that cannot be untrained or untaught or removed from that dog's response to stress."

Austin City Councilmember Don Zimmerman also wants to know why the city is transferring dangerous dogs to APA.

"Public safety is our number one concern. It doesn't make any sense. If you have an animal that you know has caused some kind of injury, it would make sense to give it one chance to be rehabilitated. But if that animal injures someone again, it should be euthanized. I don't understand how there could be this revolving door of animals," said Zimmerman.

Below are the city's written responses to questions KXAN asked Tawny Hammond, through the City of Austin Communication and Public Information Office:

**KXAN:** Can you please explain why the city is referring dogs with a documented history of aggression (history of biting that causes injury) to APA? I'm asking because, we've documented cases of this happening, and want to be able to explain to the public why the city is doing this.

**City of Austin:** Firstly, It is inaccurate to say all animals with a bite history are aggressive. The vast majority of tracked bites are minor and accidental. Some bites, however, are the result of aggressive behavior. We take all bite incidents very seriously and have systems in place to identify animals with aggressive behaviors but it is simply wrong to equate a "bite report" with "aggressive behavior."

That being said, most of the dogs come to Austin Animal Center perfectly healthy with no behavioral issues. Regardless, every dog undergoes an assessment to determine any health or behavioral issues. A small number of dogs do enter our care that require on-going medical attention or who need behavioral support and rehabilitation. Our partners at Austin Pets Alive have always served to save animals most at-risk in the City shelter. This ranges from behavioral challenges to puppies with Parvovirus. After assessment Animal Services staff work with Austin Pets Alive to determine which animals would benefit from being transferred to APA's care.

While our partnership with APA has been a resounding success, enabling us to save more than 90% of the nearly 20,000 animals who come through our doors, not every case results in successful adoption to a permanent home. Both Animal Services and APA regularly euthanize dogs whose health or behavior is beyond our current ability to provide rehabilitation.

Austinites love their animals and thanks to community support and the assistance of our partners at Austin Pets Alive we've been able to comply with the Council's No Kill Resolution over the past several years. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the City, through the Animal Services Department, to determine the most appropriate outcome for each animal in our care, whether that be adoption, rescue placement, sanctuary placement or in cases when releasing that animal will threaten the immediate health and safety of the community, to euthanize it.

**KXAN:** Please explain in detail the "systems in place to identify animals with aggressive behaviors." In February, the City Shelter told us it does not use a system of assessment, but rather does "observations." Has that changed?

**City of Austin:** The City Shelter uses a system of ongoing observation combined with documented animal history in conjunction with the Animal Behavior assessment documents you were already provided through the PIR process to determine an animal's ultimate outcome. This is in contrast to a single one-time standardized assessment system which is what the Staff was referring to in [February]. The system we use is much more comprehensive since it occurs throughout the animal's stay at the shelter and therefore allows staff to observe and document behavior more thoroughly than a one off intake assessment.

<http://kxan.com/investigative-story/records-show-city-sending-aggressive-dogs-to-be-adopted/>