

DOGFIGHTING FAQ FOR ANIMAL SHELTERS

What will be the role of the shelter or humane society in a dogfight investigation or raid?

If your organization has enforcement authority for animal cruelty laws, it will likely be the lead animal organization in assisting local, state, or federal authorities in any actions against suspected dogfighters. Ideally, these responsibilities will have been clearly identified in advance through participation in a local task force (see **Community Action Guide** in this Toolkit) or through participation in the planning of the operation and the establishment of an Incident Command Structure.

Animal control officers usually have significantly more experience in handling potentially dangerous dogs than regular law enforcement, including K9 officers, so they should have responsibility for safe and humane capture and transport of any dogs that are to be seized. Shelter veterinarians may have responsibility for on-site triage and emergency veterinary care, as well as the documentation of the health of animals that are removed (see **FAQ for Veterinarians**).

If space and circumstances permit, the local shelter may have responsibility for housing animals until their disposition can be determined by court proceedings. If many dogs are involved, the shelter may have responsibility for providing care at a temporary facility (warehouse, fairground, etc.) established by law enforcement.

What preparations or precautions should be made for housing seized fighting dogs?

The safety and security of people and animals should be the first concern in housing seized fighting dogs. Animals with a fighting history often have great value for illegal purposes and they are potential targets for theft by their owners or others seeking to have such animals. Many shelters that have housed such animals have been the target of attempted break-ins.

Any facility housing seized fighting animals should have a secure perimeter fence, multiple security cameras, and 24-hour security. If it is not possible to have someone on-site at all times, the facility should be alarmed and a request should be made for increased police patrols as long as the seized animals are being housed.

Seized animals should be housed in an isolated area, not accessible to the general public. This is necessary both for security and for the control of disease that might be associated with seized dogs. The number of staff caring for the animals should be limited, with all personnel working in the area required to display photo ID. If possible, access to the area

should be by key-card or some other system that records who has entered the facility. Any authorized visitors should be logged in and out. Make note of specific requests from the public asking to see dogs involved in seizures. Remember that suspects in dogfight cases are often free on bail soon after a raid and may make efforts to regain their animals.

In addition to identifying collars, all seized animals should be micro-chipped if possible. Cage cards and other identifying material should be attached in such a way that the dogs cannot damage them.

Fighting dogs can be powerful and destructive. If possible, walls of the cages should be cinder block or cement. Cages should have wire roofs. The doors should be sturdy with hinges and locks in good condition. Doors should be double locked. Dogs should be housed individually and there should be no opportunity for them to get at one another through adjoining cages. They should be prevented from line-of-sight with other dogs by obstructing their view with sheet metal, plywood, or canvas as needed. Any damage to cages that might compromise safety or security should be reported to the appropriate staff immediately.

What are the potential risks to staff?

Although most fighting dogs show little or no aggression to people, they may be highly aggressive to other animals and can cause injuries to people in attempt to get at other dogs. Any feeding, handling, or care should always be done with at least two people present. Until and unless the dog has been shown to be reliably handled on a lead, any handling should make use of a control stick. In all cases, extreme caution should be exercised when moving fighting dogs in the presence of other dogs.

The kennel area should also have a first aid kit and tools for dealing with the possibility of an attack. Some shelters keep a breaking stick handy, such as is used by dogfighters to separate animals in a fight. Fire extinguishers and pepper spray can be effective in stopping an attack in extreme emergencies. It is desirable for the housing area to have internal alarms that can be activated in an emergency since calls for assistance might not be heard over barking.

What other special needs do seized fighting dogs have?

As noted in the **FAQ for Veterinarians**, fighting dogs are subject to a higher incidence of certain parasites and infectious diseases as a result of poor husbandry and the stresses associated with fighting. Care should be taken to prevent exposing other shelter animals to these problems. The protocol outlined in the **FAQ for Veterinarians** should be followed as animals are received.

In general, fighting dogs do not require any special diet while in custody. However, those that were accustomed to a heavy exercise regimen may be prone to gain weight with less activity. Confiscated fighting dogs frequently destroy conventional metal food bowls. They should be fed from cardboard containers. Likewise, they may be more likely to destroy resting platforms or conventional bedding. They should be provided with towels as resting, bedding material.

These dogs may be prone to boredom in the shelter, which can increase destructiveness and other problem behaviors. They should be provided with heavy duty toys or diversions, including large size Kong® toys, bowling balls, or other indestructible play items. Dogs that can be safely walked on a lead should be given opportunities for exercise outside of their pen, with care not to allow access to other dogs or the public.

How long will the dogs likely need to be held?

That is dependent upon court proceedings. If the owner has surrendered the dogs or if they have been declared abandoned (i.e., no one claimed ownership at the time they were seized), then the court may grant the shelter authority to decide on the appropriate disposition soon after seizure. If they have not been surrendered they may be considered evidence and the defense may delay proceedings as long as possible. Holds of 60–90 days are typical, but much longer periods are not unusual. Some courts are reluctant to release dogs to the shelter or other agency until a suspect has been convicted, which can take a year or more from the initial arrest. Other court actions such as custody or bond hearings can help avoid unnecessary delays that potentially hurt the animals, the sheltering agency, and the community.

What is it likely to cost the shelter to house seized fighting dogs?

That of course depends on how many dogs and how long you will be expected to hold them. The actual costs will not be much different from those involved in housing other animals in your care unless you have to make major modifications to the facility for the sake of safety and security or have overtime costs associated with the care. A typical raid may result in the seizure of 2–25 animals, but this can vary widely. Shelters that have housed such animals generally report expenses on the order of \$10–\$20 per day per animal, plus any veterinary expenses associated with vaccinations or special care. The greater cost to the shelter is the loss of the use of those kennels for the duration of the hold period, which can impact the ability to house potentially adoptable animals. This is one reason why it is desirable to plan for a secondary, secure, off-site location for the temporary housing of such animals if at all possible.

Who pays for the care and housing of the animals that are held?

Many states have provisions in their animal cruelty or dogfighting laws that require or allow for the posting of a bond for the care of animals that are the subject of a case. Such laws are intended to protect the sheltering agency from excessive costs, as well as to protect the owner from unnecessary destruction or disposal of “property” in the event of an acquittal. Usually such bonds are for reasonable costs of care per animal, payable 30 days in advance. If such provisions are not available, it is reasonable for the prosecutor to request a disposition hearing within 30 days of seizure that could request surrender of the animals to the shelter or the payment of such funds in advance as part of a suspect’s bond.

What is the effect of such housing on seized animals?

Dogs seized in dogfight raids are individuals who might respond very differently to shelter confinement. Some respond to exercise and proper care by becoming well-socialized to a variety of people and even other animals. Others remain stressed and highly aroused by proximity to other dogs and begin to deteriorate physically and behaviorally. In general, the less time the animals spend in the kind of isolation needed to hold them as evidence the better. The medical and behavioral evidence that might support allegations that a dog has been used in fighting can usually be determined in the first week or two of confinement. Usually a determination of whether a dog can be considered a candidate for rehabilitation can be made within 30–60 days. Longer hold periods put unnecessary burdens on the shelter and on the animals.

What is likely to be the final disposition of seized fighting dogs?

In the past, nearly all dogs seized in dogfighting raids were euthanized. Some state laws consider fighting dogs to be contraband and require their euthanasia. The successful placement of many of the dogs seized in the dogfighting case involving NFL star Michael Vick has drawn attention to the need to view such animals as victims and as individuals and greater efforts have been made to evaluate and rehabilitate seized dogs. Few shelters have the resources to responsibly evaluate, rehabilitate, and place more than a few animals from such circumstances. They often do not have adequate resources to try to place pit bulls already in the shelter that do not have a known fighting history. However, there has been growing public pressure to make reasonable effort to try to assess animals when possible. Since 2008 several shelters that received fighting dogs have been able to conduct such evaluations and work with local and national breed rescue groups to place significant numbers of animals. Efforts to assess and rehabilitate such dogs serve to reinforce the fact that the dogs are victims and, like other victims of abuse handled by the shelter, are deserving of extra effort. If euthanasia is considered to be the only humane solution for many of the animals that were seized, the blame must be focused on the dogfighters who created the problem and not the shelters and law enforcement agencies that are attempting to respond to it.

Resources

- Melinda D. Merck. 2007. *Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations*. Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lila Miller and Stephen Zawistowski (Editors). 2004. *Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff*. Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing.
- Leslie Sinclair, Melinda D. Merck and Randall Lockwood. 2006. *Forensic Investigation of Animal Cruelty: A Guide for Veterinary and Law Enforcement Professionals*. Washington, D.C.: Humane Society Press.
- Dogfighting: Sheltering the Victims. *Animal Sheltering* July-August 1997.