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# Ending Animal Abuse: Community Outreach in Chicago

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Community outreach helps turn the tide

To see the ravaged forehead of the gentle female Pit Bull was an emotional moment for Tammy Schmitt, DVM. A section of skin three to four inches wide — the diameter of a grapefruit — was simply gone, exposing the hard bone of her skull. When Schmitt looked closely, she saw that the edges of the skin were smooth, not torn. A person with a cutting blade — not another animal — was responsible for the dog's injuries.

"It was horrible," Schmitt says. "I had never seen anything like it. This poor dog was obviously in a lot of pain."

A pair of Chicago residents had discovered the dog abandoned in the streets; her torturers were never found. The kind strangers took the dog to Animal Ark, a veterinary clinic known for its partnerships with animal rescue groups. Schmitt led a team through an elaborate surgery, and the dog healed even more rapidly than expected.

Six weeks later, Faith, as she is now called, was in her new adoptive home. "This dog had every reason to be fearful of people," says dog trainer Janice Triptow, president of [Chicago Canine Rescue](#), the nonprofit group that arranged her adoption. "But she's warmed up to her new family. It's been gratifying to see."

While it's difficult to pinpoint an accurate number of animal abuse cases in Chicago, thousands of reports are called into the city every year. In July 2011, police seized 20 dogs in nearby Gary, Ind., and arrested four men allegedly involved in dogfighting activities. Officers at the scene described blood spatters and dogs with scars and wounds, including one with a large hole in his lip. Police also found dogfighting tools such as "break sticks," devices used to open a dog's jaws. Every year, this type of scenario plays out repeatedly in communities throughout Chicago and northwest Indiana. A 2007 study by the Chicago Police Department found that 68 percent of Chicago's animal-crime offenders have also been arrested for narcotics, and 59 percent of them have been arrested for using or carrying a firearm. The numbers point to a criminal culture that, intentionally or otherwise, victimizes animals. Authorities are wise to the link between crime and animal violence: both the Chicago Police Department and the Cook County Sheriff's Department have formed task forces dedicated to deterring animal crimes.

## An Ounce of Prevention

The American Counseling Association notes that the phenomenon of animal abuse often starts when children want to emulate the behavior of a parent or peer. Dogfighting rings are an obvious example. Police report that their members often invite juveniles (usually preadolescent or adolescent boys) to witness the savage fights, and when a dog loses, the boys also witness the dog's "punishment" — shooting or some other method of death. The experience may lead young people to assume that dogs are little more than machines "built" for abuse.

The results can be devastating. In January 2010, two boys, ages 10 and 12, were arrested in Orlando and charged with cruelty to animals as part of alleged dogfighting. The boys told police they had seen dogfighting on [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com) and decided to try it for themselves.

In Chicago, animal advocates are working year-round to end the perception of animals as commodities rather than sentient beings. [Safe Humane Chicago](#), an animal advocacy group sponsored by Utah-based Best Friends Animal Society, has developed a program for teenagers in juvenile detention that allows them to interact with shelter dogs for 12 weeks. "We do some enrichment and training with them, and talk about proper animal care," says volunteer Callie Cozzolino. "We usually do an agility field trip — we take them to a dog daycare where they can run the dogs through agility courses. They get to see what productive dog sports look like, rather than street stuff."

At the end of the course, the teens show off their skills with their dogs at a graduation program. "They're really good with the dogs; they form deep relationships with them," Cozzolino says. "There's a lot of amazement and pride when they're doing agility, or even just teaching the shelter dogs the basics, like 'sit' and 'down.' In the first couple of weeks, the kids are reluctant [to participate], but after that, we'll ask for a volunteer, and somebody's hand shoots up."

The organization also runs programs at two Chicago public high schools to train teenagers in humane education; the youths, in turn, travel to area elementary schools and teach children what they've learned. "We talk about how to treat a dog kindly, safe ways to approach a dog, quite a few different things," Cozzolino says. One activity involves a grab bag with items such as a dog brush, rabies tag, bowl, slippers and chocolate. Children take turns pulling items out of the bag, and the group discusses whether each item is "good" or "bad" for a dog.

The Humane Society of the United States started reaching out to Chicago's urban youth in 2006 with its End Dogfighting campaign. In this innovative project, young male consultants — some of them ex-dogfighters — walked the streets in high-risk communities and started up conversations with preadolescent and teenage boys. Often, the boys already had a Pit Bull or Pit mix on a leash, enjoying the status the dog brought them. HSUS volunteers invited the boys to free dog obedience and agility classes, and the program proved to be surprisingly popular, with dozens of boys teaching their dogs new skills. Area vets helped with free vaccinations and spay/neuter surgery.

End Dogfighting was expanded into a larger program called [Pets for Life](#), and quickly spread from Chicago to Atlanta, Philadelphia, New York and Los Angeles. Both young people and adults now can enroll their pets in its free training classes, wellness clinics, in-home dog training and other activities. "We've found that people in underserved communities really do care for their pets," says Laurie Maxwell, the program's Chicago director. "They just don't have the resources or information they need."

Maxwell describes a man in his 20s, who was having financial difficulties, breeding his Pit Bull in his home. Then he encountered the Pets for Life program. It took weeks of education, but the man finally got his dog sterilized and vaccinated. HSUS is helping him by providing dog food and other supplies as he tries to get on his feet financially. As Maxwell notes, “It’s very difficult for people to have the energy and resources to care for their animals when they’re worried about their housing situation, gang violence or other problems. Sometimes, in the inner city, the problems can seem insurmountable.”

Maxwell recalls a 15-year-old boy whose life was difficult. Gang violence raged on his street, frequently forcing him to stay inside his home with his younger siblings, whom he babysat. Then one day, the boy found an abandoned dog in a nearby alley. Surrounded by poverty and violence, he could easily have turned to dogfighting for status and cash. But he enrolled in Pets for Life, putting his dog through HSUS dog-training classes. He has taken the dog to a veterinarian for free vaccinations and neutering, and learned to care for him properly.

“This dog means the world to him,” Maxwell says. “He keeps the dog with him. It’s amazing to see the human-animal bond manifest itself in the midst of all this adversity.”

Maxwell acknowledges that some feel dogs should be removed from adverse situations, and says that HSUS does call authorities when there is clear evidence of animal abuse. However, volunteers stress education, respect and the benefits of the human-animal relationship, and this approach brings good results. “People are so thankful,” she says. Since January 2010, Pets for Life has reached about 2,000 people in the Chicago area alone with humane education, dog training and other services.

She added that Pets for Life refers animal guardians to community services that can help them with job training, medical care, groceries, housing and other forms of basic support, taking the pressure off and creating a better environment for the animals.

### **A New Life for Abused Animals**

Safe Humane Chicago (SHC) has also turned its attention to rescuing animals who are victims of abuse or neglect. The program begins in the courtroom, where SHC volunteers monitor criminal cases in which animals are involved — dogs, cats or other pets. Some, including Pit Bulls or “bait animals” trapped in the world of dogfighting, have been actively abused; others were simply seized by police when their guardians were arrested on charges involving illegal drugs, weapons or other criminal activity.

Court advocates watch these cases closely, sending letters and petitions to judges and offering a silent presence in court. The goal is to encourage judges to pass maximum sentences on animal abusers. However, as a related benefit, the program alerts SHC to pets who are being held as evidence at the city pound.

In the past, once a court case was adjudicated, “about 2 percent of those dogs made it out alive,” according to SHC founder Cynthia Bathurst. “Now, we have a dog trainer (Triptow) who assesses them and figures out what resources they need.” The dogs are put through extensive temperament and behavioral testing; about 52 percent pass, and are placed in foster care. Eventually, they are adopted.

The other 48 percent, Bathurst said, have severe health issues or uncontrollable aggression,

either toward humans or other animals. Bathurst wishes she had the resources to save those animals as well. “We do as much as we can,” she says.

Since it began in January 2010, the program has saved more than 130 dogs from euthanasia and has received support not only from Chicago Animal Care and Control, but also from 15 local animal rescue groups who offer to foster dogs. SHC volunteer Callie Cozzolino vividly remembers taking in her foster dog, Swindle.

“He was found in a hot shed with seven other Pit Bulls — no food, no water,” she says. “I don’t really know much else about him.” Four of the seven dogs passed their temperament testing and made it into the foster program. Cozzolino was quickly taken by Swindle’s affectionate personality, and decided to adopt him. He since has adapted to his new life, and is content and happy, Cozzolino reports.

The process does take time, says SHC volunteer Kathleen Budrean, who is also foster program and adoptions coordinator for Friends of Chicago Animal Care and Control, a nonprofit rescue organization.

“Some of the dogs may never have even been in a home; they may have been in a crate in a basement, or locked in a shed,” she says. “Going into a home, [they] may be like, ‘Oh, what do I do now?’ Sometimes, total freedom is not what the dogs need.”

When dogs with this background go into foster and adoptive homes, Triptow often recommends letting the dog live in a smaller room, then “graduating” him to a bigger room. At the same time, people may need to work with the dog on basic housetraining and obedience skills — something abused dogs are rarely taught. As Bathurst notes, “You can’t just take a dog who has been in an abusive situation and assume that two weeks later, you can start going to the dog park. You have to realize what their life has been like, and the habits they’ve developed. We need to put dogs in situations where they can succeed, not fail.”

Chicago animal activists hope that the work they’re doing will take root in communities where animal abuse and neglect are more common. “As animal lovers, we tend to have a lot of anger against people in these communities,” Maxwell says. But not all are criminals, and many benefit from education and support.

“There’s a lot working against these guardians,” she says. “We, as animal service providers, need to step up and fill the gaps.”

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## **New View of Dogs**

Chicago resident Anthony Pickett, 45, a former dogfighter, now spends his days counseling young people, particularly boys, about keeping their dogs out of the ring. Pickett is a full-time community outreach worker for Pets for Life.

As a young man, Pickett had been walking his Pit Bull when some young men approached him from behind and challenged him to fight his dog against theirs. Pickett agreed, but his dog came back bloodied and scarred. Pickett took the dog to his mother’s house, where he recovered for a month. At home, his twin 3-year-old daughters were heartbroken.

“They kept asking me, ‘Where’s the doggie, Daddy?’” he said. “I thought, ‘I can’t keep doing this.’ I can’t do it to my kids. I can’t do it to the dog.”

Pickett left the world of dogfighting permanently. Later, he volunteered for End Dogfighting in Chicago after hearing about the program from a friend. Eventually, the HSUS hired him as a full-time outreach worker.

Pickett said of the youths he counsels, “They don’t have anyone like me to show them that there’s more to their dog than dogfighting,” he said. The free classes in agility, obedience and conformation help the youths bond with their dogs as pets.

“And they value the dogs more,” said Pickett, who takes the youths to amateur agility events as spectators. “It’s like their eyes open, and they go, ‘Wow, look what you can teach a dog to do.’ Then, once they train their own dog, it’s like he goes to a different level.”

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