



Put a Stop to Off Leash Dogs in On-Leash Areas

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In Denver, off-leash dogs in on-leash areas are becoming more and more of a problem. Since our dogs were attacked by an off-leash dog a few years ago, we've become quite sensitive to this issue.

Too many dog owners seem to be operating under the false assumption that there is nothing wrong with allowing their dogs to run off leash in on-leash areas, because their dogs are “friendly” and won't harm anyone. Many of these folks will even yell at a distance, as their dogs come galloping toward people “Don't worry, he's friendly”, as though that makes their illegal and dangerous choice acceptable.

First, for a leashed dog, having an unleashed dog rush unwanted and uninvited into its personal space when it is restricted by the leash is a stressful event. Many owners who walk their dogs where off leash dogs are prohibited do so for a reason – their dogs aren't good playing off leash with other dogs. It is blatantly selfish and irresponsible to put these people and their dogs in the very situation they want to responsibly avoid. The lawbreaker's attitude seems to be that they and their dogs' welfare are more important than that of others.

The “Oh he's friendly” claim is not only irrelevant but also a myth. No dog owner can accurately predict 100% of the time how her dog will react when greeting another dog. All we have to do is look at the skirmishes and fights that happen at dog parks, even when the dogs are on “equal footing”. And having an illegally off-leash dog cause a problem for a leashed dog just once is too much. People who take their dogs to dog parks willingly assume that risk – those who walk only in leashed areas should not be forced to by irresponsible owners.

Unfortunately, animal control officers (ACO) in most cities are overworked and underpaid and can't provide as consistent enforcement of leash laws as is needed. And irresponsible dog owners aren't making it easier. According to an article in the Denver Post, dog owners apparently have created a “watch system” using text or phone messages to alert their fellow lawbreakers with off leash dogs when they spot an ACO.

On the ACO side, we'd like to see immediate fines for the first violation, without a pass or warning. The latter only encourages people to continue to keep repeating bad behavior, knowing there's a good chance they may get away with it.

Off-leash dogs in on-leash areas are not only dangers to other dogs but people as well. Most on-leash areas are multi-use, frequented by cyclists, skateboarders, joggers and small children, all of whom are in danger when dogs run uncontrolled.

Off-leash dogs are also dangers to themselves. Few owners have drop-dead verbal control over their dogs, putting them at risk for running into nearby streets and being hit by cars, or getting lost.

According to the executive director of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association, who was present at the press conference that led to the newspaper article, one-third of all homeowners' insurance claims stem from dog bites. To be compensated for injuries and damages in the attack on our dogs, we instigated a civil suit against the owners whose homeowners' insurance company settled the claim.

So, the take home message is, if you are tempted to take your dog off leash in an on-leash area – **DON'T!** Dogs and people using -leash areas have a right to use them without being run up on by your dog. Stop and consider the effect your behavior, and that of your dog, has on others who are using the area.

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