

Harris County

HCPHES

Public Health & Environmental Services

**Regional Veterinary Public Health Challenges:
Demographics, Diseases, Disasters &
Dangerous Dogs**

May 2007

2223 West Loop South. Houston, Texas 77027

www.hcphe.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background and Significance	3
Veterinary Public Health – An Overview	3
Demographics – Population Growth and Urbanization	4
Diseases – Transmitting Infections from Animals to Humans	4
Disasters – Issues for Humans and Pets	5
Dangerous Dogs – Scope of the Problem	6
Recommendations	10
Conclusions	11
Appendix 1: Harris County Pet Bull Dog Task Force Recommendations	12
Appendix 2: HCPHES VPH Staffing Request and Implementation Timeline	19

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Veterinary Public Health – An Overview

What is Veterinary Public Health?

Veterinary Public Health (VPH) is defined by the World Health Organization as “**the sum of all contributions to the physical, mental and social well-being of humans through an understanding and application of veterinary science.**”

Why is it important?

Human health is intimately connected to animal health and production, making VPH an integral component of the health triad (people-animals-environment). Many diseases are classified as zoonotic diseases, meaning they are transmitted from animals to people. Close associations between people, animals and the surrounding environment can result in serious human health risks and subsequently, severe economic consequences. Approximately 75% of emerging or reemerging diseases affecting humans over the last 10 years have originated from animals or animal products. Many of these diseases have the potential to spread quickly and, given the ease of world travel today could quickly have global consequences. Furthermore, organisms that cause zoonotic diseases might be used for terrorism. In fact, the zoonotic agents that cause anthrax, botulism, plague, small pox and rabbit fever are classified by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as high priority agents that pose a risk to national security. It is important that public health systems be prepared to address these agents. Significant threats to human health also exist from naturally occurring instances of zoonotic diseases such as SARS and avian influenza. Living in a geographic area subject to natural disasters such as hurricanes and flooding that may provoke mass evacuations, further demonstrates the linkages between human health and safety, and animal well-being.

Overview of Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services (HCPHES) VPH Division

In the 1950's Harris County was hailed as the rabies capital of the world, prompting Commissioners Court to authorize a rabies/animal control department for the purposes of eliminating free-roaming rabid dogs and controlling rabies in the pet and people populations. The program was placed under the responsibility of the Harris County Health Department and in 1986 Harris County opened the current animal shelter on Canino Road. Through its field operations HCPHES VPH enforces animal laws relating to: rabies quarantine, pet rabies vaccination, licensing, dangerous dogs, dangerous wild animals and animal cruelty. In response

to 157,362 calls from the public in 2006, HCPHES Animal Control Officers (ACOs) impounded 15,802 stray animals and issued 2,575 warnings or citations. Additionally, ACOs responded to 891 requests from law enforcement officers for assistance. Through its kennel operations HCPHES shelters animals that are impounded by ACOs or turned in, and insures that pets are properly vaccinated and licensed prior to their release. In 2006, HCPHES VPH coordinated 2,561 animal adoptions – a three-fold increase since 2000.

Challenges facing HCPHES VPH

DEMOGRAPHICS – POPULATION GROWTH AND URBANIZATION

Texas ranks in the top 10 states in terms of percentages of households that own dogs, with 43% of households having at least one dog, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association – *U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook*. This reference cites Texas with an estimated 5.8 million owned dogs, second only to California with 6.6 million dogs. Using those projections, Harris County has an estimated 859,120 owned dogs and 1,127,595 cats. ***Please note that these numbers do not include un-owned dogs and cats.*** Harris County’s animal shelter, established in 1986 was 13,690 square feet and was designed to care for approximately 14,000 animals annually. Last year HCPHES VPH sheltered a total of 25,064 animals - 15,158 dogs, 9,424 cats, and 482 wild animals. As a result of the tremendous population growth in Harris County there has been a subsequent increase in the companion animal population. For example, the 16% increase in people from 2000 to 2004 netted a 40% increase in animals sheltered. We expect this trend to continue. Of added concern is the influx of animals to the Harris County shelter from other jurisdictions. For example, in the first four months of 2007, citizens delivered over 476 animals originating from addresses inside Houston city limits. Furthermore, as a result of the recent Montgomery County decision to charge for animal control services, dogs from as far away as Hempstead and Dobbins have been brought to the Harris County shelter.

DISEASES – TRANSMITTING INFECTIONS FROM ANIMALS TO HUMANS

Rabies – sometimes called “hydrophobia” is a viral disease transmitted through the saliva of a rabid animal or person. All warm-blooded animals, including humans are vulnerable to the disease. The disease is ultimately fatal, making prevention and early detection of the disease fundamental to rabies prevention programs. Rabies is common in Texas, surviving in populations or reservoirs of “high risk” animals including; bats, skunks, coyotes, foxes, and raccoons. The most common reservoirs of rabies in the Harris County area are bats and skunks.

The May 2006 death of an Humble teenager dramatically increased local awareness of bats as potential sources of rabies infections. Although he was exposed to rabies at home, school campuses attract bats creating many opportunities for student/bat encounters. Each encounter requires extensive investigation to determine if the rabies vaccine series is indicated. Since May 2006 HCPHES VPH has experienced increased requests for:

- bats to be picked up and submitted for rabies testing
- educational programs concerning bats and rabies
- consultation with medical care providers concerning the appropriate use of rabies vaccine
- consultation with victims and parents of victims
- bite case investigations
- consultation with school administrators concerning bats

Additionally, the increase popularity of imported exotic pets is a public health concern. These animals often enter the U.S. with little or no regulatory oversight, or illegally. The 2003 monkey pox outbreak illustrates the ease with which emerging zoonotic diseases can enter the U.S. and spread rapidly across the nation. This outbreak reached Harris County requiring an immediate response by HCPHES VPH. A local pet store was quarantined for six weeks and HCPHES VPH confiscated, euthanized and disposed of 31 exotic rodents that had been exposed to monkey pox. Recently, there have been three situations in the Harris County region involving imported wildlife, purchased as pets and subsequently developing diseases with human health implications.

Furthermore, organisms that cause zoonotic diseases (i.e. diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans) might be used for terrorism. Most of the organisms classified as Class A agents for biologic weapons of mass destruction are transmitted from animals to people. It is important that public health systems be prepared to address these agents. HCPHES VPH has supported the United States Air Force and Texas A&M in a study to determine the incidence of naturally occurring Tularemia (rabbit fever) in Harris County. HCPHES VPH also participates in planning and preparing for Avian Flu and is developing a Veterinary Health Alert Network.

DISASTERS – ISSUES FOR HUMANS AND PETS

Society benefits from viable livestock/agricultural production systems and emergency managers have traditionally protected these resources during disasters. However, needs of companion animals and their owners became a prominent issue during Hurricane Katrina. Data show that a key reason that citizens do not evacuate in the face of a hurricane is concern for the welfare of

their pets. In fact, President Bush – who said during Hurricane Katrina that if he had to evacuate, the one thing he would take would be his dog, Barney – signed the *Pets Evacuation & Transportation Standards (PETS) Act* in October 2006. This legislation contains provisions to help with pet disaster planning including:

- Requiring that local and state emergency preparedness authorities include plans for pets and service animals in their disaster plans to qualify for grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- Granting FEMA the authority to assist states and local communities in developing disaster plans to accommodate people with pets and service animals
- Authorizing federal funds to help create pet-friendly emergency shelter facilities
- Allowing FEMA to provide assistance for individuals with pets and service animals, and the animals themselves, following a major disaster

In Texas Governor Perry’s “Task Force on Evacuation, Transportation and Logistics”, convened after the Hurricane Rita evacuation, mentioned in their final report:

“Pets present a unique special need during an evacuation. Pet owners are often unwilling to abandon their pets, which could result in loss of life. Shelters and transportation services should plan and provide for special accommodations for pet owners during an evacuation.”

HCPHES VPH convened the Harris County Disaster Animal Management Task Force in February 2005 to address issues associated with the evacuation of pet owners during disasters. The task force consists of emergency management personnel (both Harris County and City of Houston), Texas Department of State Health Services, Texas Cooperative Extension Service, animal welfare agencies, state and federal animal regulatory agencies, and the American Red Cross. Additionally, HCPHES VPH provided guidance in creating the Texas State Animal Resource Team (TXSART) and continues to serve in an advisory capacity. HCPHES VPH is part of the standard emergency command structure during hurricanes as well as disease outbreaks.

DANGEROUS DOGS – SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

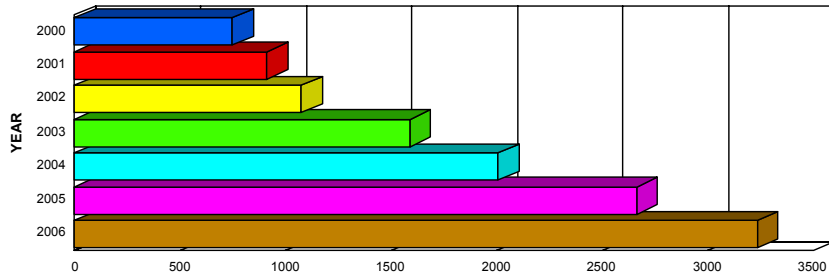
Until about 1980 pit bull dogs were owned by two groups of people – serious, professional dog fighters and pet owner/hunters. The serious dog fighters killed puppies and dogs that did not meet their standards as fighters. They were refining the century old dog fighting traits of:

- Demonstrating consistent aggression to other animals

- Absence of aggressive behavior towards people
- “gameness”, i.e. a willingness to continue to attack until they are dead, their opponent is dead, or they physically can’t continue the fight
- ability to ignore pain
- failure to reduce aggression in response to normal signs of canine submission

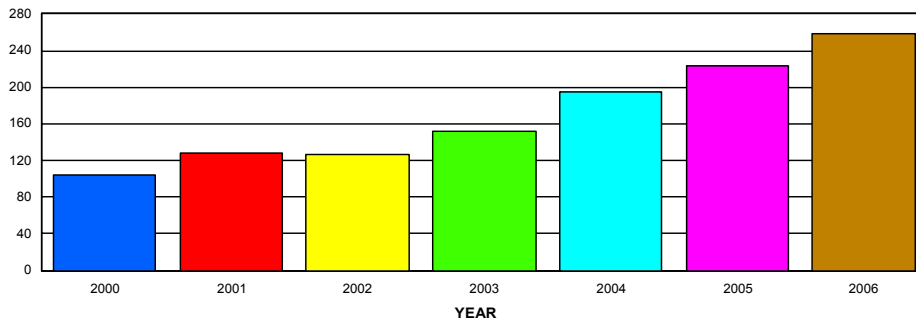
At this time the general public was not aware that dog fighting existed and the activity was a felony in only six states. Serious dog fighters kept to themselves knowing that the public would be outraged at dogs being bred to fight and kill one another. During the 1980s there was a push to make dog fighting a felony in all states. Television and print media coverage associated with each legislative initiative depicted undercover fighting scenes and dogs capable of fighting unto death. This coverage had the unintended consequence of popularizing the image of pit bull dogs among people that never knew the dog existed. Unfortunately, this created a new market for dogs that were previously killed by dogfighters, for example dogs that displayed aggression towards humans. Soon pit bull dogs were seen on MTV type videos, rapper videos, movies and commercials. Owning one of these “bad” dogs would elevate one’s status in the neighborhood and, because of their appearance they became popular with gang members. They are commonly used as guard dogs – both for property and people. Professional entertainers endorse dog fighting and at least one National Basketball League star has been convicted of involvement with dog fighting. In the subsequent decades these animals have been raised, bred, fought by “amateur” dog fighters, sold to the public, and finally discarded to end up in animal shelters. Most pit bull dogs today are owned by people that do not understand the genetic traits of the Pit Bull Terrier and do not know how to properly breed or train them. All of this has resulted in thousands of pit bull dogs being abandoned into Harris County streets and animal shelters. For the last six years HCPHES VPH has experienced an increase in pit bull type dogs arriving in the shelter. And the chart below indicates the trend will continue into 2007.

Pit Bull Type Dog Intake 2000 - 2006

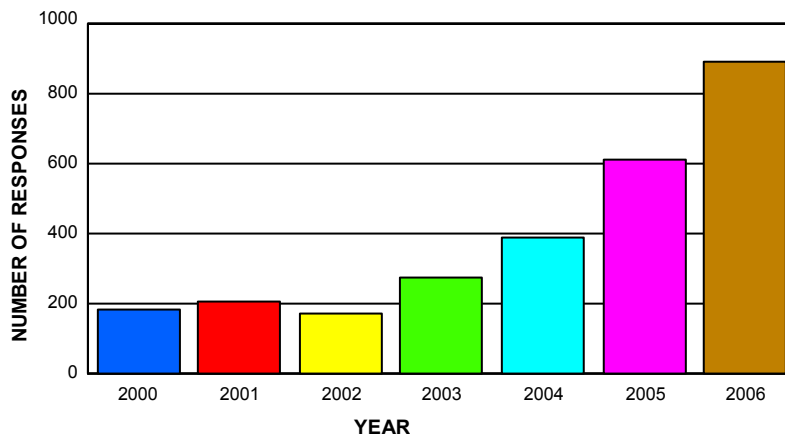


Concurrently there was an increase in reported bites attributed to pit bull type dogs and requests from law enforcement for assistance – primarily with aggressive dogs.

Bites by Pit Bull Type Dogs 2000 - 2006



**REQUESTS TO ASSIST LAW ENFORCEMENT
2000 - 2006**



Issues associated with pit bull type dogs in the region were first addressed by members of the Harris County Pet Care Task Force. In fact, the Pet Care Task Force, convened by HCPHES

VPH in 2005 identified the increase in pit bull dogs in area animal shelters as one of the barriers to fostering a community of responsible pet owners. At that time the task force recommended that legislation be drafted for the 2007 session to regulate the sale of animals from roadsides and parking lots in an effort to curb a common means that pit bull type dogs are distributed in the community.

In October 2006 HCPHES, Veterinary Public Health convened the Harris County Pit Bull Dog Task Force to explore the following trends having an adverse impact on public health and safety:

- Increases in animal bites being attributed to pit bull dogs
- Increases in pit bull dogs in all area animal shelters
- Increases in request from deputies for assistance with aggressive dogs
- Increased concerns about dog fighting in our region recognized by the newly created Harris County District Attorney Animal Cruelty Section

The purpose of the task force was to identify the type and scope of issues associated with or related to pit bull type dogs in the Harris County region. Once these issues were identified strategies would then be developed for each issue. The need for this initiative was unfortunately illustrated with the death of a four year old boy who died as a result of dog bites received while riding his bicycle in November 2006. HCPHES VPH appreciates the contributions of participating agencies – see page 18 for a list of participating organizations and agencies.

On December 5, 2006 Harris County Commissioners Court requested that:

- **“HCPHES, Veterinary Public Health and the County Attorney investigate possible regulations or legislative initiatives to deal with animals that pose a threat to public safety.”** In response to this directive, the Harris County legislative committee, with support from HCPHES has worked to develop and support effective legislation appropriate to this request.
- **“Management Services work with HCPHES, Veterinary Public Health to determine if additional animal control officers are needed to deal with stray dogs in unincorporated Harris County, and for the Pit Bull Task Force to provide recommendations regarding vicious dogs....”** In response to this directive, an initial report concerning animal control officer staffing needs was submitted to Commissioners Court during the budget process earlier this year. The current document contains the recommendations of the Pit Bull Dog Task Force regarding vicious dogs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING ZOOBOTIC DISEASES

- HCPHES should continue to support school districts in developing bat safety programs as requested
- HCPHES should enhance education and guidance to health care providers concerning the appropriate use of rabies vaccine
- HCPHES should continue to monitor the exotic wildlife trade and investigate situations as they arise
- HCPHES requests approval for Zoonosis Technician position requested in the FY 2007-2008 budget to assist with case investigation and Veterinary Health Alert Network communications.

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING NATURAL DISASTERS

- HCPHES should continue to provide insight and direction to state level emergency planning for animals by participating in TXSART
- HCPHES should continue to provide support to the Harris County Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security in developing local plans for pet owners and pets during disasters
- HCPHES should continue to provide leadership in the Disaster Animal Management Task Force to collaborate regional personnel and animal management resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING DANGEROUS DOGS

Detailed recommendations regarding dangerous dogs are summarized in the “Harris County Pit Bull Dog Task Force Recommendations” (see **Appendix 1**). Resources requested to accomplish the Task Force recommendations as well as recommended activities concerning animal disaster management and control of zoonotic diseases are delineated under “HCPHES VPH Staffing Request and Implementation Timeline” (see **Appendix 2**).

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, in addition to increased demands resulting from population growth, three key issues simultaneously dominate the veterinary public health agenda. First, the popularity of the pit bull terrier and other aggressive breeds as status symbols, fighting dogs, and guard dogs causes concern for both law enforcement and animal control officers. Implementation of the Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommendations will provide the foundation for creating safe neighborhoods where families can enjoy their yards, streets, and parks. Second, federal law and state emergency plans now require that provision be made for pets during disasters. HCPHES VPH must train staff and obtain resources to support the Harris County Office of Emergency Management & Homeland Security in this effort. Third, health experts predict that, with the ease of world travel and continued globalization of trade and commerce, public health concerns associated with zoonotic diseases will continue to increase. Continued population growth and urbanization of rural areas in Harris County will provide opportunities for people to contact indigenous wildlife. Additionally, the current trend of adopting imported exotic wildlife provides ample opportunities for disease transmission.

Dangerous dogs, disasters and diseases have no respect for geographical boundaries – these problems are regional problems requiring regional solutions. Strong community partnerships involving both the public and private sectors are already underway to develop comprehensive solutions. This document summarizes recommendations specific to the unique role and contribution of HCPHES VPH.

APPENDIX 1
HARRIS COUNTY PET BULL DOG TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support legislation that promotes and encourages responsible pet ownership and prevents animal cruelty.
2. Provide leadership in developing a regional, collaborative spay/neuter initiative.
3. Support the creation of a community of responsible pet owners by enhancing the enforcement of existing animal laws.
4. Measure and analyze the animal law violations being reported to law enforcement agencies in the Houston/Harris County region.
5. Initiate the development of an informed community to increase pet owner responsibility and prevent bite cases – especially bites to children.
6. Support Harris County District Attorneys Office (HCDAO) and Harris County Attorneys Office (HCAO) in the development of a regional, coordinated approach to the investigation of complaints of dog fighting and animal cruelty as they relate to dog fighting.
7. Upon passage of HB 916, implement a program with Crime Stoppers for the reporting of dog fighting.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Legislative Strategy

Effective animal laws are foundational to creating a society that, while allows the owning of pets, protects the community from dangers associated with pets and protects pets from being mistreated or exploited. The Pit Bull Dog Task Force vigorously recommends and supports the following legislative initiatives:

County Legislative Recommendations:

- Revise the Harris County fine and fee structure to encourage responsible pet ownership by increasing the fees associated with pet licenses, impoundment, and the boarding of dangerous and biting animals.
- Support passage of state legislation to place additional requirements or restrictions on the owner of dangerous dogs and dogs that are unconfined or unrestrained and, if passed modify Harris County Animal Regulations accordingly. (The City of Houston currently has ordinances that require neutering of animals dogs after the 2nd impoundment.)

State Level Legislative Recommendations:

- Support the passage of state legislation (as mentioned above) that would give Harris County Commissioners Court the authority to place additional requirements or restrictions on dangerous dogs, dangerous wild animals, and unconfined or unrestrained animals
- Support SB 254 giving Harris County Commissioners Court the authority to regulate the selling of animals from roadsides, right-of-ways and parking lots (The City of Houston recently passed an ordinance prohibiting the sale of animals from roadsides.)
- Support legislation strengthening the anti-cruelty statute
- Support legislation strengthening the penalties for people convicted of dog fighting

2. REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE SPAY/NEUTER INITIATIVE

Data indicate that dogs inflicting the most injury to people are more likely to be large, young adult, male dogs that have not been neutered. Several fatal dog bite cases involved intact males with a female in estrus (heat) nearby or on the premises. Other studies indicate that castrating male dogs will reduce roaming in 90% of the dogs, inter-male aggression in 60% of dogs, and dominant behavior towards people in 60% of dogs. In addition, spaying female dogs eliminates the protective, maternal behaviors associated with the caring for and raising puppies. Community expenditures for spay/neuter programs last year came from the following sources:

- Harris County - \$30,000
- City of Houston – \$20,000
- Houston SPCA - \$200,000
- Houston Humane Society - \$403,050
- Spay Neuter Assistance Program -\$395,251 in mobile spay/neuter services, \$762,016 in spay/neuter services at the clinic

Additionally, Saving Animals Across Borders, with the support of PetSmart Charities is developing a regional spay/neuter initiative and plans to open five spay/neuter clinics.

Coordination and expansion of existing spay/neuter efforts will greatly decrease the numbers of stray and aggressive dogs in our region and the task force strongly recommends that Harris County provide leadership in developing a regional collaborative spay/neuter initiative by:

- Approving the HCPHES VPH fiscal year (FY) 2007-2008 budgetary request for a Community Resource Specialist position. This position will provide leadership in building the spay/neuter collaborative with interested animal welfare agencies. Furthermore, the position will identify and secure resources to fund the initiative.

- Targeting “problem areas” as defined by numbers of complaints, dog bites and request for services.
- Consulting with the County Attorney’s Office about the legality of waiving the impoundment fee if the owner neuters his pet and using portions of the pet license fee to fund this initiative.
- Amending “Harris County Animal Laws” to require spay/neuter after impoundment pending the successful passage of relevant state law. (City of Houston currently has this requirement after the second impoundment.)

3. ENHANCED ENFORCEMENT OF EXISTING ANIMAL LAWS

Many breeds of dogs are easily trained to “show” aggression. For example, several breeds were originally developed to protect livestock or property. These dogs are of little threat to society unless they belong to an irresponsible person. Several breeds have, unfortunately been bred and trained to purposely show aggression to other dogs for the purposes of financial gain. Problems occur when these owners disregard animal laws, fail to socialize their dog(s) to other people and have inadequate control over their dog(s). These dogs, if allowed to run loose, create numerous health and safety problems in the community. Decreasing the numbers of free-roaming pets and the elimination of animal cruelty and fighting in the Houston/Harris County region are necessary measures to control vicious free roaming dogs.

Effective enforcement and civil and criminal prosecutions of animal laws can contribute significantly to decreasing the number pets running at large and the elimination of animal cruelty and fighting in the Houston/Harris County region.

Developing or enhancing an understanding of animal laws within regional law enforcement agencies is important because deputies and police officers are typically the first to respond to emergency complaints about aggressive and/or threatening animals. Consequently, understanding animal laws will enable them to accurately evaluate an animal law complaint, determine whether additional resources are necessary, write citations if appropriate and gather evidence at the time of the incident that will facilitate prosecution. The presence of contract deputies, who are knowledgeable about animal law, may also deter violations in their assigned district. Effective and fair enforcement of the law enforcement sends a clear message to the public that unconfined dogs, animal cruelty and animal fighting will not be tolerated. Consistent enforcement may also encourage voluntary compliance law.

Regional training programs, developed by the HCDAO and HCAO in conjunction with Harris

County Sheriff's Office, Harris County Constables, and the Houston Police Department will be delivered to peace officers, animal control officers, and humane officers to ensure a uniform, cost-efficient protocol for criminal and civil investigations. Classroom instruction will be focused towards law enforcement supervisors while on-line training will be made available to officers in the field who are unable to attend traditional classes due to scheduling constraints.

Creating a community of responsible pet owners requires an enhanced, robust enforcement of existing animal laws. To achieve this, the Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommends that:

- The Harris County District Attorney's Office, Harris County Attorney's Office and the City of Houston Attorney's Office collaborate to develop and implement the curriculum for an "Animal Law" training program targeting regional law enforcement officers.
- Commissioners Court approve and fund the HCPHES VPH Staffing Request and Implementation Plan to provide full animal control services 7 days a week and to coordinate and provide training of law enforcement officers. (See Appendix 2).

4. DETERMINE SCOPE OF ANIMAL RELATED COMPLAINTS IN REGION

Law enforcement officials, animal control officers, and animal welfare investigators respond to thousands of animal complaint calls each year. Currently, there is no coordinated means of measuring how many complaints are made regarding aggressive dogs, injured dogs, dog fighting or animal cruelty or where the complaints occur geographically. Systems that enable such discrimination and interagency communication would have a profound impact on resource allocation and the development of interventions to effectively, efficiently and economically address animal problems. In order to define the specific type and extent of animal law violations being reported in Houston and Harris County the Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommends:

- The addition of the following nature codes to the Harris County Mobile Data System (MDS) System to allow law enforcement to specifically report the nature of the call through the "call disposition."
 1. Livestock Calls
 2. Dog Bite Cases
 3. Aggressive Dogs
 4. Dogs running at large
 5. Roadside sale of animals
 6. Animal Cruelty
 7. Other animal humane calls
 8. Dog fighting

9. Rooster Fighting

10. Exotic animals

- The development of a quarterly report providing a summary of the volume of animal related complaints categorized by type of call and location of call, to be provided to HCPHES VPH and law enforcement agencies.

5. COMMUNITY EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

In addition to being illegal it must become socially unacceptable for dog owners to allow their pets to run loose, train animals for aggression or to allow dogs to fight. Furthermore, citizens must know who to call when they have loose dogs in their neighborhood. The dogs involved in the fatal mauling last November were reported by the media as being in the neighborhood for a “week or so”. Yet, there were no complaints about the dogs filed with HCPHES VPH. Parents must learn not to leave pre-school age children unattended with a dog - even if it’s the family pet. Moreover, people - especially children need to learn how to avoid being the victim of a dog bite. An educational program to address all these issues must include awareness programs, risk communication and public information campaigns to elicit changes in the various behaviors associated with this issue. Community partnerships can augment the reach of these campaigns and the development of a consistent animal safety and pet responsibility message will be available for interested organizations in the region to distribute. For example, the Houston SPCA has offered to convey the messages, once developed, to the 23,000 children they contact each year.

The Pit Bull Dog Task Force believes that dog bites and attacks can be prevented by having an informed community and recommends the development of a comprehensive public education campaign to include:

- Commissioners Court approval of the Health Education Specialist position requested in HCPHES FY 2007-2008 budget to provide the leadership to develop and coordinate delivery of the various components of program
- Development and implementation of a “responsible pet owner” campaign to emphasize licensing, vaccinating, neutering and restraint
- Development and implementation of a bite prevention programs targeting preschool aged children

6. COORDINATED APPROACH TO INVESTIGATING DOG FIGHTING AND RELATED COMPLAINTS

Currently “animal cruelty” complaints are being investigated by the following public and private agencies:

Harris County Constable Offices

- HCPHES, Veterinary Public Health
- Harris County Sheriff’s Office
- Houston Humane Society
- Houston Police Department
- Houston SPCA

Understandably, the current system creates silos of surveillance and investigation data within each agency with little or no opportunity for collaboration. The result is overlap, inefficiency and decreased convictions. Coordination of animal cruelty and fighting investigations, combined with the passage of House Bill 916 –making dog fighting a felony – would enhance the Harris County Attorney’s and District Attorney’s ability to prosecute and convict people that train and allow their dogs to act aggressively toward other dogs. Therefore, the Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommends a coordinated approach to the investigation of dog fighting complaints and animal cruelty as it relates to dog fighting.

7. COMMUNITY WIDE REPORTING OF DOG FIGHTING VIA HOTLINE

The Crime Stoppers Program is able to provide rewards for crimes that are felonies. Once dog fighting becomes a felony offense in Texas, partnering with our local Crime Stoppers organization will provide a mechanism for the accurate reporting of dog fighting and enable the successful prosecution of cases. Upon passage of HB 916 the Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommends the development of a program with Crime Stoppers for the reporting of dog fighting.

PIT BULL DOG TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Representatives from a wide range of entities were invited to serve on the Pit Bull Dog Task Force, including:

Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services (Committee Chair)

Harris County Judge's Office

Harris County Commissioner Precinct 1

Harris County Commissioner Precinct 2

Harris County Commissioner Precinct 3

Harris County Commissioner Precinct 4

Harris County Attorney's Office

Harris County District Attorney's Office

Harris County Sheriff's Office

Harris County Constable Precinct 1

Harris County Constable Precinct 4

Harris County Constable Precinct 6

Harris County Human Resources and Risk Management

City of Houston Mayor's Office

Houston Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care

City of Houston Attorney's Office

Houston Police Department

Houston Humane Society

Houston SPCA

Mayor White's Animal Protection Task Force

University of Houston Law Center

South Texas College of Law

Harris County Veterinary Medical Association

Texas Veterinary Medical Association

Houston Crime Stoppers

APPENDIX 2

HCPHES VPH STAFFING REQUEST AND IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

In response to the request to “determine if additional animal control officers were needed to deal with stray dogs in unincorporated Harris County”, HCPHES VPH submitted a detailed “*Update and Needs Assessment Regarding Dangerous Dogs*” during the normal budget process. The needs analysis detailed resources needed to provide complete VPH field services 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The document mentioned that due to kennel space limitations, HCPHES VPH can not adequately house animals that would be impounded by increased animal control officer staffing. In addition, due to the characteristics of the animal control officer labor market, we estimate it would take 1.5 to 2 years to fill the additional animal control officer positions. Due to the multiple factors that impact implementation, should Commissioners Court decide to adopt the recommendations of the staffing assessment, either in whole or in part, we recommend a phased in approach to implementation. An overview of our recommended phased-in approach follows below. In order to support implementation of specific strategies (such as the development of the law enforcement training component and the community-wide spay/neuter initiative) subgroups of the Pit Bull Task Force will continue to work collaboratively.

PRIOR TO EXPANSION OF KENNEL FACILITIES

Phase 1: Focus on working collaboratively with law enforcement officials and the District Attorney’s Office to develop and implement enhanced animal law training for law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers encounter animals in a variety of settings as a result of conducting their routine responsibilities and enhanced training could provide them with additional tools to ensure their own safety as well as that of the community members (with respect to animal encounters). Also implement other recommendations from Pit Bull Dog Task Force that are not dependent on expanded kennel space. During Phase 1, HCPHES respectfully requests approval to:

- Fill the Trainer position submitted as part of the special “Update and Needs Assessment Regarding Dangerous Dogs in Harris County” in February 2006. This position will support Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommendations for enhanced enforcement of existing animal laws.
- Fill the Veterinary/Zoonosis Technician position submitted as a component to the HCPHES FY 2007-2008 target budget request. This position will support Pit Bull Dog Task Force recommendations for determining the scope of animal related complaints, and for supporting the development of a coordinated approach to investigating dog fighting

and related complaints. This position will also support recommendations regarding the monitoring and tracking of disease that can be transmitted from animals to humans.

- Fill the Community Resource Specialist position submitted as a component of the HCPHES FY 2007-2008 target budget request. This position will support Pit Bull Task Force recommendations for establishment of regional collaborative spay/neuter initiatives.
- Fill the Health Education Specialist position submitted as a component of the HCPHES FY 2007-2008 target budget request. This position will support Pit Bull Task Force recommendations for developing and implementing a community education campaign regarding responsible pet ownership, bite prevention, etc. This position will also support development of educational campaigns related to animal disaster preparedness and prevention of zoonotic disease such as rabies.

SUBSEQUENT TO EXPANSION OF KENNEL FACILITIES:

Phase 2: Begin to fill (as the workforce market permits) the animal control officer positions, Field Sections Supervisor, Kennel Section Supervisor, Operations Technician, Information and Referral Specialist, and Kennel Technician, with emphasis on expanding “late shift” field service to weekends and holidays. Consider targeting initial staffing capacity on high need issues, as identified by analysis of HCPHES VPH data. For example, hours with high volume of reported bite cases or loose dog reports and geographic areas with higher volume of reported bite cases or loose dog reports.