

The Law and Your Dog

What should you do if you find your dog on the wrong side of the law? As the number of animals increase in family homes, so do the laws restricting their behavior. Dogs will be dogs unless taught another way to behave. It's important that you take some steps to teach your dog how to be a good canine citizen in your community.

Biting and barking are normal dog behaviors, but ones that are frowned upon in the human world. If you find yourself faced with a summons to court because your dog has been accused of breaking the law, make sure you understand fully the charges against you and the possible outcomes for you and your dog. The Dangerous Dog laws come with expensive requirements for liability insurance, specific fencing, and many other rules to follow, some on a daily basis to keep the public safe from your dog. There no longer exists a one bite rule in most states. If your dog bites, there usually will be consequences unless you get legal representation to help present your case in court. Barking cases are also on the rise and noise ordinances are enacted in many localities. You could find yourself with a court order to remove your dog from the community in which the disturbance occurred. This means either you move or you place the dog in another home in a different community. A lawyer can often help find another solution either through mediation or an agreement with the court. Finding a lawyer familiar with dog behavior cases can be difficult. There are few and far between, so call around and ask questions. Finding a lawyer who is at least compassionate about your case is a good start even if there is no experience in animal law.

Why is legal representation important? These type of cases usually only have about ten minutes in court, if that. Judges have a lot of cases to hear and usually animal-related ones are not high on their priority list. They will review the facts in front of them, make a decision, and issue a ruling, usually without a chance for you to argue your dog's case at all. Lawyers know their way around a courtroom and know how to get your case heard. They are familiar with working out agreements that can often allow your dog one more chance depending on the circumstances.

Another important player to have on your side is a professional animal behavior consultant. A knowledgeable dog trainer can review the facts of the case and devise a plan to help your dog learn new behaviors. They can help the lawyer understand the circumstances of the case from the dog's point of view. Was the dog provoked? Were there unusual occurrences that caused the dog to act out of character? These are important aspects to explore if you want to explain to the court why your dog should be given another chance.

The lawyer and animal behavior consultant will often open discussions with animal control officers and commonwealth attorneys in order to get an idea of how they are feeling about the case and discuss options long before even getting to court. Although getting legal and behavior representation can add up, it's well worth the cost. A negative outcome in court can mean even more costs to comply with the court's ruling. Unfortunately, the costs are so prohibitive that dogs are often euthanized instead—a devastating emotional cost.

Of course, the best solution to this problem is preventing it all together. Train your dog from the moment you bring the dog home. Don't wait for a problem to develop. Many people think they can just bring a dog into their home and do nothing to teach the dog how to live in a human environment. Most of the calls I get are from people who have done no training beyond sit and give a paw. Although sit is a good start and giving a paw is a cute trick, neither does much to teach a dog how to get along with others, not jump up, and how to use a soft mouth if their instincts do tell them to bite, i.e. they get their tail stuck in a door and turn to bite. If you do end up with a court summons for your dog even when you have done a lot of training, arguing your case is easier because the dog trainer doesn't have as much work to do to help the dog if there is a baseline of basic training skills.

Dogs are here to stay. We love their companionship. Many of us feel safer with their presence since they bark to warn. It's up to us to teach them how to live in our human world with our many rules. Take time to teach your

dog before problems start. If you do find yourself on the wrong side of the law, don't delay. Get legal and behavior help immediately. It could be a matter of life or death for your dog.