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North Texas Law Makers Seek Better Cop-Canine Relations

By Claire Z. Cardona – March 8, 2015



Jim Osorio teaches police officers how to deal with aggressive dogs, covering everything from how to use a baton to stop a charging dog, to how to read the animal's body language.

“Basically everything else but to shoot the dog,” he said.

And if the Texas Legislature passes a bill requiring law enforcement officers to be trained in how to handle canine encounters, a lot more people could be sitting in the eight-hour course like the one he's currently providing to the Dallas County Sheriff's Department.

Osorio operates Arlington-based Canine Encounters Law Enforcement Training and offers the course and others like it across the country.

Three North Texas representatives, Helen Giddings, D-Dallas, Nicole Collier, D-Fort Worth, and Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth, have filed bills requiring animal encounter training for peace officers after several controversial fatal canine shootings. Giddings' and Collier's bills are scheduled for public hearing in the Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee on Tuesday.

All three bills would require training on how to use nonlethal methods to handle animals. Geren's bill is canine-specific and was drafted with the help of the Texas Humane Legislation Network and the owners of a dog that was fatally shot in 2012.

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement would establish and require the training. The departments would absorb the cost.

Without the training, Osorio said officers just react rather than thinking through options such as using a catch pole. He believes the training should start in the basic police academy.

"A lot of departments are changing their use-of-force policy and adding a section for animals because you're not going to use your baton" or pepper spray on an animal the same way you would on a person, he said. "They need to learn how to use that stuff if they're going to use it."

Giddings said she's pleased that law enforcement organizations overwhelmingly support legislation for mandatory training.

She decided to file the bill after receiving calls from constituents about family pets that had been shot.

"They all believe that law enforcement officers don't intentionally harm family pets, because many of them are pet owners themselves," she said. "But they believe the officers simply have not been trained on how to deal with animals when they go into these situations and the animals may look threatening."

Shelby Bobosky, vice president and legislative co-chair of the Texas Humane Legislation Network, said the lawmakers' bills don't address all stakeholder issues, which is why the network worked with Cindy and Mark Boling on the separate bill.

The Bolings' 4-year-old border collie was shot by a Fort Worth police officer who mistakenly went to their house to get a statement about a copper theft.

"I just give ... [the legislators] an A-plus for wanting to do it," Cindy Boling said.

Similar legislation was written in the 2013 legislative session and carried by then-Sen. Wendy Davis, but the bill did not make it out of committee.

Boling said she hopes legislators focus on Geren's bill because it has been vetted by various law enforcement organizations, has realistic requirements and she's confident it will pass.

The Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas is throwing its support behind Geren's bill, but will work closely with legislators to ensure it doesn't impede an officer's ability to protect him or herself, said spokesman John Moritz.

The association was offering Osorio's class free to officers so they can become certified, Moritz said.

"Enhanced training better protects law enforcement officers as they go about their duty, the public and, in this case, the animals themselves," he said. "Better training almost always generates better outcomes for all concerned."

Several recent canine shootings in North Texas have bolstered support for the legislation.

In December, an executive report cleared a Cleburne officer of any criminal charges after he fatally shot a pit bull Aug. 10 during a call about aggressive dogs that had trapped a family in their vehicle. The report stated the officer shot the dog after it began moving toward him, growling and baring his teeth.

Following the incident, the city implemented training for dealing with dogs and officers trained with Osorio. The city also signed a resolution supporting legislation.

More than 2,800 Texas officers, including the Potter County sheriff's office and Fort Worth, Austin and Round Rock police departments have been trained in the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement's defensive tactics canine encounters course.

The Dallas Police Department has not taken a stance on the bills, Officer Monica Cordova said.