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Grieving Texas Dog Owners Want Police To Be Trained In How Not To Kill Animals

By Marissa Barnett – March 10, 2015



AUSTIN — Grieving dog owners told House lawmakers Tuesday that animal training for police could have prevented the deaths of hundreds of beloved pets across the state.

“This training is mandatory for UPS and FedEx delivery men; why isn’t it for law enforcement?” said Cheri Scholz, who lives near Amarillo. Her 8-year-old blue heeler, Smokey, was fatally shot in 2012 by a police officer responding to a loose dog report.

Smokey had escaped from her yard. The officer attempted to get the dog into his car, but Smokey darted away, Scholz said. Neighbors who witnessed the event told Scholz the police officer then shot and killed the dog, she said.

The House Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee considered two bills Tuesday from North Texas representatives that would require police to receive training in encountering animals. The bills were left pending.

Controversial dog shootings have grabbed headlines recently. Since 2009, Texas officers have shot more than 400 dogs, according to the animal advocacy group 4 Keeping Our Pets Safe.

Law enforcement representatives told lawmakers the training — a course that teaches officers how to deal with aggressive dogs and read an animal's body language, among other things — could prevent officers from being attacked and save families the grief of unnecessary shootings.

“Canine encounter training will help fill this void and provide officers with effective options and valuable knowledge to use when we come into contact with dogs while performing our regular duties,” said Amy Knoll, assistant chief for the Cleburne Police Department.

One of the bills, by Rep. Helen Giddings, D-Dallas, would require all officers to receive training in encounters with animals. Another, by Rep. Nicole Collier, D-Fort Worth, would focus solely on dogs and require new officers and officers seeking promotion to complete a four-hour training program within two years.

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

Committee chairman Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, indicated that he preferred legislation that includes training for a variety of animals.

Phillips and Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, also inquired about offering the course online in an effort to reduce costs, particularly for smaller police departments in far-flung parts of Texas.

“There are a lot of financial costs to training like that, where there's travel and everything else, so that's something we're all going to have to think about,” Phillips said.