

CHELSEA RISEMAN COMMENTARY AT 2.1.24 COUNCIL MEETING

During an Austin City Council meeting on February 1, 2024, a resolution was introduced that could be harmful to dogs unless there are appropriate programs and processes in place that allow for accurate data collection/distribution and the reinstatement of a behavior program at Austin Animal Center. Chelsea Riseman, Director of the Dog Behavior Program at Austin Pets Alive! offered this compelling speech during the citizen's comments section of the council meeting.

My name is Chelsea Riseman and I am the Director of the Dog Behavior Program at Austin Pets Alive! I'm here today to express my very deep concern over this resolution and tell you more about our program and where it stands.

Our Behavior Program at APA! is comprised of 21 skilled individuals whose roles are to provide behavior evaluations, enrichment, socialization, and individualized treatment plans for the dogs in our program, as well as matchmaking, counseling, and ongoing behavioral support to the community members who bring them into their care . The overwhelming majority of the dogs who receive these services under our Program are transferred to us from Austin Animal Center.

This program was built and funded to work in partnership with the Austin Animal Center Behavior Program, whose creation was called for in the 2011 No Kill Resolution. We were best able to uphold the highest level of both rescue and safety at the time and best assess which dogs may pose a real threat to safety and which just needed some additional support or had slipped through the cracks.

Having a behavior program is not just about saving dogs; it is about ensuring the safety of our community. We need to safely evaluate the dogs, communicate their behaviors to rescue partners and to the community, and provide resources and support for those facing challenges.

However, contrary to the commitment to public safety that this resolution stands on, AAC's Behavior Program was dismantled years ago without notice or consultation with APA!, resulting in almost all of those additional dog cases falling on our shoulders. Beyond this, without the dedicated AAC program support,

- these dogs are being sheltered there longer without their needs being met nor the behavioral support to accommodate this lacking,
- Assessments are not being carried out by behaviorally trained team members to ensure correct assessment of safe or unsafe behavior,
- and minimal, inconsistent notes are being shared when being plead to us.. oftentimes with very concerning discrepancies that could hold large implications for the dogs.

Therefore, it has been particularly distressing to hear the misinformation circulating to bolster this resolution. Specifically, the inflammatory statements suggesting the release of dangerous dogs to rescues who then dangerously release them to the community. In reality, our team is diligently taking on the majority of these cases, and tirelessly working day in and day out to uphold the safety of both the animals and our community. The abrupt abandonment of AAC's responsibilities within our partnership has forced us to watch dogs we could have saved be killed, or forever undertake the challenging task of expanding and growing our resources as a grassroots nonprofit rescue organization to ensure the city has a safety net in place. This takes a high toll on the mental health of our program staff, who roll up their sleeves everyday to dedicate their lives to the well-being of these animals and the safety of our community.

I want to emphasize here that we advocate responsible, humane euthanasia when a dog is a true danger to public safety, and don't believe that implementing a bite scale is inherently bad. However, the lack of accurate, objective, and complete information reported by AAC, by underqualified resources, that I have experienced during my time in this role is of the utmost concern. Mismanagement of data that carries such heavy weight is dangerous, and changing the scale used to record it does not fix these incompetencies. It only puts our people and pets more at risk.

Let's work together to implement humane, effective solutions that uphold our shared values of compassion and responsibility to our community. *"We ask that you require this item to return to Council in six months to review the data compiled and ensure accuracy."* Thank you for your time and consideration.