

Military Pet Advocates Request for a Standardized Military Pet Policy

The problem: There is little to no consistency regarding military housing pet policies, specifically numerical limits and permitted breeds. In many cases, there are no meaningful consequences for irresponsible pet ownership, which is the underlying cause of dangerous pets. Instead, there are a myriad of patchwork pet policies, some controlled at the local level and based on contracts with privatized housing corporations, which can impose additional pet restrictions beyond the service's pet policy. Some service members are required to live in government housing and as more troops operate in a joint environment, the policy should account for these realities. And, service members are often unaware of the pet resources at their next duty station, nor is pet education easily accessible.

Military pet advocates propose federal legislation to require a joint military task force convene for the purposes of creating a standardized Department of Defense official pet policy. The group will address breed neutral solutions with an adjustment to privatized housing contracts, better enforcement of pet laws and better access to pet services and education. One solution might be a mandatory pet education program for dog owners in government housing administered through family service centers in cooperation with the local animal care contractor.

Facts

Benefits of Pets in People's Lives

- Pets can draw out even the most isolated personality and having to praise animals' helps traumatized veterans overcome emotional numbness, relearn trust and remember feelings of love.
- Teaching pets commands develops a people's ability to communicate, to be assertive but not aggressive, a distinction some troops returning home from war struggle with.
- In a 2005 study, the American Heart Association found that a 12-minute visit with a therapy dog reduced blood pressure and levels of stress hormones and eased anxiety among hospitalized heart failure patients.

Responsible Pet Ownership

- Despite numerous requests from the Department of Defense and the public, pet abandonment on military bases is not a named offense in the Manual for Court Martial. Walter Cox, a retired judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces and the chairman of the Military Justice Commission, said in a 2009 article for Military Times that the issue of military pet abandonment was the number one military justice issue submitted by military families. The commission received multiple letters seeking accountability and recommended this provision. Specifying the bad behavior would strengthen those cases and increase the chance of prosecution. Advocates have now been told the decision rests at the National Security Staff.
- In 2011, the Hawaii Legislature passed a resolution asking the military convene a task force to make pet resources available to military families. No action to accomplish this request was undertaken by the Department of Defense.
- Military family services centers provide little or no pet education information. Most PCS, deployment and indoctrination briefings contain multiple resources for childcare, but no information for pets.
- Military veterinarian clinics provide ONLY preventative care and many times have neither open appointments nor do most provide spay/neuter services.

Breed Bans

- The Department of Defense veterinarian community issued a 2012 policy letter opposing breed bans.
- Breed identification has no scientific basis. Numerous studies confirm that animal experts cannot agree on breed lineage by visual identification. DNA testing is not accepted in the veterinarian community as a definitive indicator of breed.
- Banning breeds does not reduce dog bites. A recent evidence-based analysis published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association explains why bans do not reduce dog bites. The authors calculated the absurdly large numbers of dogs of targeted breeds who would have to be completely removed from a community, in order to prevent even one serious dog bite. For example, in order to prevent a single hospitalization resulting from a dog bite, the authors calculate that a city or town would have to ban more than 100,000 dogs of a targeted breed. To prevent a second hospitalization, double that number.
- Military game wardens/animal control has said in confidence that they cannot enforce breed bans and can only rely on the breed labels assigned by the owner. They say while they are required to enforce the policy, they privately do not support it.

Personal impact: *"We're having a harder time than we thought buying a house out here near Fort Irwin. We can't afford to stay in a hotel much longer, on my husband's BAH, and may have to live on post. If that happens the housing office told us that we could go ahead and bring our dogs, and if anyone suspects them of being a banned breed cross (and one very much looks like one of those although he's simply listed as a boxer mix), housing could request a DNA test. If they are found to have ANY amount of any of the breeds we will have three days to get them off post. If we refuse the DNA test, we also have three days to get them off post. I don't know what we're going to do if we don't have an accepted offer by the end of the week. I'm scared for my dogs and for my family."* (Ashley Williams, Posted on the Standardize Military Pet Policy Facebook Page, Feb. 27, 2013)

At the heart of any public safety issue involving dogs is the need for responsible pet ownership. Breed bans have NOT solved the problems of irresponsible pet ownership. Military communities must hold dog owners responsible for the humane care, custody, and control of all dogs regardless of breed or type. Almost 30,000 people have signed an online petition to Standardize Military Pet Policies. We respectfully request action taken on this issue to prevent needless family separation and to create a safe military pet community.

Prepared by: Theresa Donnelly, Dogs on Deployment Board Member (www.dogsondeployment.com)
Contact: thereasa_pickard@yahoo.com; 808-388-3423.