

Unchained

A Virginia city passes a chaining ordinance a decade in the making



Companion animals kept on chains for long periods of time have posed a big problem in Danville, Va. Many times each year, the Danville Area Humane Society has received dogs who had chains embedded in their necks, and there have even been cruelty cases involving cats kept on chains.

In December 2009, the city council of Danville, Va., unanimously passed an ordinance that strictly limits the amount of time people are allowed to keep their pets on chains. The ordinance, which will go into effect this July, forbids the chaining of any animal for more than four hours in any 24-hour period, and forbids the practice outright for animals who are injured or under 4 months old, and during times when the temperature reaches freezing.

The new law is the endpoint of years of work by Paulette Dean, executive director of the Danville Area Humane Society, and her

staff and network of supporters. In December, Mike Markarian, president of the Humane Society Legislative Fund—a 501(c)(3) that lobbies for animal welfare legislation and works to elect humane-minded candidates to public office—interviewed Dean about her experiences and published the conversation on his blog; we’re reprinting an excerpted version here.

As Markarian pointed out, many animal shelter leaders believe they can’t lobby for animal protection laws, or are so overwhelmed with day-to-day operations that they don’t have the time to spend on

advocacy. “But,” Markarian wrote, “if we only address the symptoms of the problems when animals are in distress, we will never get to the root causes of those problems and prevent animals from ending up in distress in the first place.”

Mike Markarian: Can you tell us a little bit about Danville as a community? What are some of the challenges for animals and animal lovers there?

Paulette Dean: Danville, a city of about 48,000 on the North Carolina state line, is struggling to redefine itself after the loss of



Paulette Dean

the textile and tobacco industries. It has the highest unemployment rate in the state, and also struggles with low education and high poverty rates.

Animal issues have been low priorities in the past. The Danville Area Humane Society operates the city animal shelter, and receives about 5,500 dogs and cats each year, along with approximately 250 other companion animals and livestock.

Perhaps because of the problems that come as a result of poverty, there is a severe pet overpopulation problem. Although the humane society has helped 17,000 dogs and cats get spayed or neutered since 1993, the numbers received at the shelter increase each year.

We seem to have a higher incidence of animal neglect and abuse than surrounding areas, although that may be because we have two court-appointed humane investigators (a volunteer position in Virginia). The board president and I have functioned as investigators for many years, and we have a strong working relationship with the police department and animal control officers. We investigate and prosecute many cases each year, including starvation, hoarding, dogfighting, and varying degrees of neglect.

How did you approach the chaining issue, and what has led to your successes?

As we investigated complaints of neglect, one thing became very apparent: 90 percent of the complaints received involve companion

animals constantly kept on chains. We were “fortunate” to have a gallery of hundreds of pictures that were taken of dogs on chains.

Seventeen years ago when I began full-time employment with the Danville Area Humane Society, we received a call from a man who said he had heard a dog whining in the woods behind his house, but he had not heard the dog whine for a couple of days. The animal control officer went to the address, and found the body of a dog in the woods. The dog had once been chained and evidently broke loose somehow, but still dragged the chain. The chain became entangled in bushes, and the dog starved to death. The animal control officer told me then that I should work to get all dogs off chains.

In 1996, parts of Danville were flooded as a result of Hurricane Fran. Then-Gov. George Allen toured the area, and saw the bodies of two dogs who had drowned as they were chained to their doghouses. He had his driver stop, and he knocked on the door to tell the woman he wanted the bodies buried. He even stopped by later that day to make sure that had been done.

The task of getting animals off chains seemed pretty overwhelming at that time. However, through the years that thought never left my mind whenever we received a dog with an embedded chain in his neck (many, many times each year) or when I saw for myself the chained dogs in backyards with no shelter, food, or water. I knew something had to be done.

Most dogs we held for rabies quarantine were dogs who were kept on chains. Make no mistake—the problem was not just having dogs constantly chained. We also investigated a few horrific cases of cats kept on chains. We knew that any effort to get dogs off chains had to include all companion animals.

With the support of the board (after all, the board president also functions as a humane investigator; he was with me for the vast majority of the cruelty cases), we held a summit meeting of sorts about three years ago. We invited veterinarians, dog trainers, representatives of the kennel club, and others we thought would be interested. We showed pictures of a few of our abuse and cruelty cases. From that meeting, we had the support of most of the people who worked with animals; we all agreed the overpopulation

problem and the plight of chained dogs topped the list of problems faced by animals.

Our anti-chaining campaign was announced, with no plan of what we could do about it. The newspaper did an editorial about how we may be sincere, but we had not convinced the public. That we took as a challenge and a lesson. We met with the editors of the paper (very nice people who supported our work), and showed them pictures of our cases. We began to issue more news releases of our court cases. We purchased ads in the paper about the loneliness of chained dogs, and wrote articles for our newsletter.

I met separately with each of the nine city council members and shared the pictures and stories with them. We proposed that an ordinance be enacted to prohibit the chaining of dogs on unoccupied property. At the city council, we testified about how people chained large numbers of pit bulls in the yards of empty homes. That ordinance passed easily for, as one council member said, “It is a no-brainer.”

How did you continue your campaign after that first ordinance passed?

Nothing happened for a couple of years, and then [in the summer of 2009], we decided we needed to reenergize the campaign. We issued a news release, inviting members of the public to come to a meeting about our anti-chaining campaign. We had a very nice turnout for that meeting.

We told the attendees that the best thing they could do would be to call city council members, and encourage their family and friends to do so. We told them we would notify them when it was time to begin making the contacts.

The board of directors of the Danville Area Humane Society voted to commit \$10,000 to help build fences for dogs to get them off chains, with the requirement that we also be allowed to spay or neuter the animals, at our expense, for whom we build fences.

A city council member happened to visit the shelter as we were bringing in a dog we had just seized. He saw the embedded collar and the thin body condition, and asked the city manager to please put a proposed ordinance on the agenda for a work session of the city council.

We prepared a PowerPoint presentation, and went to the work session. We asked for a three-hour limit in a 24-hour period, and told about our \$10,000 commitment. We talked about how this would help decrease the number of unwanted births. With the media there, we showed the pictures and told the stories. We also asked for delayed enforcement to give people time to make other arrangements for their chained animals.

Council members decided to advance the proposed ordinance, but they scheduled two public hearings. We posted the dates on our website, so no one could accuse us of hiding the truth from them. The editor of the newspaper wrote a very strong editorial in support of the ordinance.

As soon as the proposed ordinance was put on the agenda, we sent out an e-mail alert to supporters. Council members later said that it was apparent that the community was in overwhelming support. The newspaper allows anonymous online comments, so we asked people to respond to any negative comment.

We had about 45 supporters show up for the two public hearings. For the first one,

we had asked strong speakers to speak up. I gave a brief overview of my experiences with chained animals. I reminded them that I had personally taken the horrible pictures that they had seen, and the pictures were taken in Danville, Va. A veterinarian, an attorney who had helped us with our civil custody cases, and other supporters told stories and gave facts.

We thought it would be helpful to have a teenager speak. The president of a local high school club agreed, [but] tragically, her father was killed three days before the public hearing. I sent an urgent e-mail to our list, asking them to help us find another young person who could speak. One young woman stepped forward. She was terrified, and spoke softly, but she begged the city council to make Danville a better place to live—for the humans and for the animals. She held them spellbound by her courage and her conviction.

A couple of days before the second public hearing, someone wrote a letter to the city council, bringing up the point that people who live in the historic district are not allowed to have chain-link fences for

their dogs. A motion was made to table the ordinance until that issue could be resolved. Immediately after that meeting, a small group attended the work session. Council members resolved that concern, and an amended ordinance was submitted. Actually, the amendments strengthened the ordinance.

However, we sent yet another e-mail alert, urging supporters to not give up the battle. I heard from a few council members who said they had received only two negative comments, but had been inundated with positive comments.

A week and a half later, the proposed ordinance passed. One council member could not attend, but he asked the mayor to give his regrets and assure the public that if he had been there, his vote would have been "yes." When the mayor announced that and said the vote was unanimous, we gave the council a standing ovation. It was apparent to everyone that it was an ordinance whose time had come. 🏆

To read the complete interview, go to animalsheltering.org/Danville_chaining.



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