



CANINE LEGISLATION: WHAT IS THE AKC DOING ABOUT IT? WHAT CAN YOU DO?

SHEILA GOFFE, *Director of Government Relations, AKC*

Across the nation, breeders and owners of purebred dogs are under legislative attack by organizations whose agenda includes ending our great tradition of purebred dogs as family pets and working companions. It's not surprising, then, that one of the most common questions we hear is, *what's the AKC doing about canine legislation?*

The AKC is doing a lot. Some of AKC Government Relations (GR) accomplishments include tracking more than 1,000 state and local bills/ordinances each year. GR has conducted, on average, two public training sessions a month throughout the country. AKC GR has made thousands of individual contacts with legislators; launched two newsletters and an online legislative tracking system; and expanded our outreach to the public and the fancy in person, online and in publications. With our federations, AKC has been on the frontlines of successful legislative battles in California, Illinois, Indiana, Oklahoma, New York, North Carolina and many other states.

The Role of AKC in Canine Legislation

Recently, the AKC Board reviewed the role of the AKC with respect to the increasing legislative pressures faced by dog breeders and owners. The Board reaffirmed the role of AKC with respect to the part of the AKC's mission statement that pledges to work to protect the rights of all dog owners and promote responsible dog ownership. The AKC Government Relations Department is charged with implementing these objectives on a daily basis and ensuring that laws governing dog ownership and breeding are reasonable, enforceable and non-discriminatory.

Advocacy works best when those who are directly affected by it take the lead in working with legislators. Legislators want to create laws that voters can support. Success in canine legislation *requires involvement by those who will be affected by it.* Hence, the AKC does not regularly send staffers out to legislative trouble spots, but instead provides educational, informational and training resources that

enable the residents of a community—those most affected by the laws—to take the lead in working for policies that best address their needs.

As part of the individual responsibility that comes with being a good dog owner, the AKC encourages all dog owners to know, understand, and follow the laws of their jurisdictions. The AKC cannot provide legal advice or advocate on behalf of individuals who have broken local dog laws.

How AKC Government Relations Can Help You

The Government Relations Department is composed of staff who have a broad range of experience in politics at the local, state and federal levels. At the federal level, the AKC also retains a team of federal advocates from the firm of Greenberg Traurig in Washington, D.C.

The GR Department provides a wide variety of resources to support clubs, federations, breeders and individuals in protecting their rights.

Some of the resources AKC GR offers include:

- Tracking and reviewing legislation to determine potential impact on breeders, owners, fanciers and the dog-owning public. This includes a dynamic online legislative tracking system that lets you track canine legislation in any state of the union and on Capitol Hill.
- Online legislative alerts and bill synopses, a monthly newsletter, a quarterly Federal newsletter, and the ability to contact thousands of AKC constituents about legislation that may threaten them. Alerts may be sent out to broad groups of individuals or narrow segments of specific target populations, depending on the issue involved. Nearly all legislative alerts provide next steps to help individuals contact their legislators as well as specific information about the AKC's perspective on the measure introduced.
- Statements of AKC issue opposition or support targeted to local, state or federal officials. These statements are specific to the particular bill and the community affected by the bill. GR also provides background data, analysis, and other intelligence to

ensure that legislation is reasonable, enforceable and nondiscriminatory.

- Issue-based policy expertise including policy briefs, model legislation, and alternate language to legislators, clubs, federations, and individuals involved in the development of canine policy.

A Few Words about Process

The first thing GR does when it learns about a potentially damaging bill is to research the measure and conduct an analysis of its impact. In addition to assistance provided to clubs, federations and individuals, GR also may contact lawmakers, negotiate language, educate officials about sensible dog laws and responsible ownership, and suggest alternatives to restrictive breeding laws or bans.

Some of the department's work is conducted outside the public eye. While it may sometimes appear that the AKC is not actively involved in the legislative process, this is not the case. Some of the GR department's greatest successes are the bills you never hear about—those that have never been formally introduced or have never made it past committee hearings.

Other times, legislation and legislative issues are best addressed by public support or opposition. This is when the GR Department issues legislative alerts or news items and provides constituents with sample letters and talking points. In some cases, staff may conduct legislative training sessions or lobby days.

How does the AKC decide which bills to support or oppose? The AKC GR Department bases its bill positions on the AKC's Board-approved canine legislative position statements, which are available on the AKC web site at www.akc.org/pdfs/canine_legislation/PBLEG2.pdf.

AKC GR tracks on average more than 1,000 dog-related measures at the state, local and federal level. To maintain this heavy workload, AKC GR depends on its friends and colleagues throughout the nation for grassroots legislative information, support and participation.

What You Can Do

As a responsible AKC dog owner/breeder, you have a special opportunity and responsibility to make your voice heard in representing the interests of responsible dog owners in your club(s) and the community.

Most politicians know very little about dogs and even less about breeding and the fancy.

Educating our legislators—*especially before an issue ever comes up*—is one of the most important things you can do to ensure dog owners and breeders interests are served when canine legislation is introduced.

- Set up a 10-minute appointment with your local representatives; introduce yourself and offer to provide insight on dog issues. This will give you access if canine legislation is introduced in the future.
- Make sure all your clubs have Legislative Liaisons and work within a state federation. GR depends on liaisons and federations as two-way information channels to learn about possible local ordinances and to get the word out about new legislation. If GR does not hear about a local issue, we cannot help. If clubs and individuals do not get our information, they cannot respond to it.
- Support—and encourage your club to support—the AKC Canine Legislative Support Fund (CLSF). This fund helps support legislative empowerment seminars at national specialties and all-breed shows, state-wide lobby days, the development of advocacy training programs, and other advocacy efforts.

For more information or assistance, call the AKC GR Department at 919-816-3720, email doglaw@akc.org, or visit www.akc.org/canine_legislation.

First published in *Perspectives*, the newsletter for AKC delegates, December 2009.
Copyright AKC, republished with permission

Revised June 2011