

# The Dog Man of Kansas City

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[www.nokillblog.com](http://www.nokillblog.com)



*The Kansas City Dog Blog ([www.kcdogblog.com](http://www.kcdogblog.com)) just celebrated its two year anniversary. Its author is Brent Toellner, a media professional who works in the advertising industry. During the work day, Brent determines the appropriate target audiences for products and then targets the appropriate television programs, radio stations, geographies, websites, and newspapers to reach them. He also writes frequently about marketing, advertising, media, and redevelopment.*

*But Brent has an alter ego: dog advocate. He is a member of Kansas City Dog Advocates, a staunch No Kill supporter, and a tireless fighter against "Pit Bull" profiling. I recently talked to Brent about his passion for canines and [kcdogblog.com](http://kcdogblog.com), one of my daily "must read" blogs about animal welfare.*

**Nathan J. Winograd:** Your background isn't in animal welfare. What is your background and why did you start blogging about dogs, specifically dog bites and "dangerous dog" type legislation?

**Brent Toellner:** I have a Journalism Degree from the University of Missouri and a Masters Degree in Journalism from the University of Kansas. I originally wanted to become a sports writer, but eventually found my way into advertising.

About 4 years ago, my wife and I moved into a house in the urban core of Kansas City, Missouri. We both wanted a dog when we moved into the new house as we've both always been dog lovers. So we went down to the local rescue and asked to meet the dog that would have the *least* likelihood of getting adopted because we really wanted to save a dog that would not otherwise have been saved.

They introduced us to a "Pit Bull," and started talking to us about the hype, misinformation, and bad reputation of these really great dogs. We didn't end up adopting that particular dog, but adopted a "Boxer/German Shepherd mix" named Grommit. A couple of months later, the rescue group found an adult "Pit Bull" that weighed 25 lbs and was nearly starved to death. Because they knew we had some interest in a 'pit bull' at the time, we took her in to foster, but we couldn't give her up—and neither could Grommit—so we ended up adopting her too.

A year later, we had two people in the Kansas City area attacked by "Pit Bulls" (one fatally) in separate incidents and many local politicians began making a lot of knee-jerk reactions. All of a sudden, all "Pit Bulls" were mean and all "Pit Bull" owners were criminals. People looked at us with suspicion. Since that time, I've seen thousands of "Pit Bulls," dogs that look like "Pit Bulls," dogs that don't really look like "Pit Bulls" but are labeled such dying in our local shelters. It's maddening, because it's all based on such bad information. They're just dogs.

And I want to change the way this is all done, because it seems so simple to actually improve the situation and change so much of what causes the problems, yet we don't. So I've spent the last years fighting "Pit Bull" bans in 25 different communities. And I blog about it almost daily on [kcdogblog.com](http://kcdogblog.com).

**NJW:** Has your journalism background helped you in making the case against Breed Specific Legislation?

**BT:** Well, let me first say that as a former Journalism student I'm just appalled by how the media has decided to typecast a certain "type" of dog as the problem, as opposed to really looking at the underlying reasons why dog bites happen. Almost universally, dog bites can be traced to one (or more) of the following factors:

1. Very young child left alone with a dog
2. Dog that is used as a guard dog and encouraged to be aggressive by the owner (these are often in poor neighborhoods with other major social problems far beyond dogs)
3. Free roaming dog, or pack of dogs
4. Previous aggressive behavior by the dog that was ignored or not corrected by the dog owner
5. Isolated and unsocialized dogs. Often these dogs are the ones left tethered as their primary (usually sole) form of containment

Until we start focusing on the underlying causes of bites, as opposed to punishing "Pit Bull"-type dogs, we will never decrease the number of major dog attacks in a community. Meanwhile, more legislation is drafted that ends up increasing the number of dogs that are killed in our shelters, without making anyone safer. So I start with providing as much information as I can about the root causes of attacks to try to provide a different voice from the local media.

**NJW:** What do you see as the major problems with BSL?

**BT:** Laws that ban certain breeds or types of dogs are often brought up in different parts of the country. Typically, a dog of a certain type will bite someone and a media circus will ensue, quickly followed by demands that the city "do something" about the perceived problem. Often, the rescue and shelter communities have left fighting these laws to the enthusiasts of these breeds, letting the "Pit Bull people" and "Rottweiler people" deal with the city councils. However, laws that prohibit certain types of dogs from living in cities affect everyone who believes that killing animals in our shelters is wrong and should be stopped.

As an animal welfare community, we've completely failed the "Pit Bull"-type dog. However, banning breeds (American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and dogs who someone says look like a "Pit Bull") not only takes animals from people's homes (many times, it is people who don't even suspect their dog could be mistaken for a "Pit Bull"); it results in an automatic death sentence for these dogs as shelters and rescues are prohibited from adopting out these dogs within that community. The end result is never increased public safety, it is only more killing...not only of the "breeds" in question, but anything that looks like them and the dogs they have to kill to make room when they are impounded.

We don't often spend time talking about the laws involved in making No Kill happen. Increasingly it is the laws—ones that often come out of these knee-jerk discussions or worse, are even supported by the animal welfare community, that makes achieving No Kill even more of a challenge. Laws such as pet limits, mandatory spay/neuter ordinances, and breed bans are not someone else's responsibility to take care of. Fighting irresponsible legislation that makes achieving No Kill impossible is the responsibility of every person who believes in saving the lives of all dogs and cats.

**NJW:** What do you see as the danger behind some of these other laws?

**BT:** Primarily, they are barriers to our life-saving cause because they actually increase the killing in our shelters. To say they make building a No Kill community more difficult is an understatement. Don't get me wrong. I support spay/neuter. Voluntary spay/neuter programs have been wildly successful and should be implemented in every city across the nation. Unfortunately, many want to take it one step further, mandating that pets must be altered. While most of the proponents of these laws have the right end goal

in mind, the unintended consequences of punitive legislation makes them counter-productive to what they are trying to accomplish.

According to the national Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, the top 10 reasons why dogs are relinquished to shelters are:

1. Moving
2. Landlord issues
3. Cost of pet maintenance
4. No time for pet
5. Inadequate facilities
6. Too many pets in home
7. Pet illness
8. Personal Problems
9. Biting
10. No homes for littermates

Mandatory Spay/Neuter, at best, only addresses one, maybe two of these reasons for pet relinquishment. And ironically, MSN doesn't address the number one reason people don't alter their pet, the high cost. As a result, MSN laws do not end up solving the reasons most dogs end up in the shelter, and usually serve a reason for animal control officers to seize pets from otherwise decent homes. When animal control officers seize pets from homes, it puts more animals in the shelter, effectively working against the No Kill ideal.

In 2006, Kansas City passed MSN of all "Pit Bull"-type dogs. Since the ordinance was passed, Kansas City has seen an 80% increase in the number of "Pit Bulls" killed in their city shelter. Many of these dogs are getting confiscated from homes because they were not in compliance with the spay/neuter ordinance. Young puppies are being killed because they look too "Pit Bull" and are not altered by the time they reach eight weeks of age. They're killed only because they have not been spayed or neutered.

Many other cities have seen similar results with their mandatory spay/neuter ordinances—of both "Pit Bulls" and of all types of dogs. Los Angeles passed their mandatory spay/neuter in February of 2008, and has seen their kill numbers go up 31% this year, after more than five years of steady decline in shelter killings.

Similarly, other cities have struggled with their mandatory spay/neuter ordinances. Problems range from decreased licensing (pushing these people underground and making them harder to reach with low cost services), significant increases in animal control costs, and an increase in shelter killing rates due to the ordinances. Simply put, mandatory spay/neuter ordinances have never led to No Kill success anywhere, ever.

**NJW:** You are putting yourself squarely against the prevailing opinion in this country. Does this surprise you?

**BT:** Not at all. I've found that a lot of people who have been doing sheltering or rescue for a long time believe a lot of things that aren't really true. From how to run a shelter to how much genetics plays a role in behavior, there are a lot of things that are "common knowledge" that I'm finding out don't have the data to support them, and in fact, have a lot of data that prove them wrong.

I'm simply amazed at how little people look toward end-results in other communities as their guides to effective policies. In my field [of advertising], we continually look at others to determine best practices so we can improve what we do. There are quite a few good case studies out there of places that are having success with shelters and animal control. I'm just amazed at how few people look at best practices around the country and find out what is really working in other places to a) end shelter killing b) minimize dog bites and attacks and c) be efficient with taxpayer dollars.

At the same time, there are a lot of academic papers on these topics, but few people in this field seem to know or care about them. There's a lot of research—particularly on causes of "aggression" and no one seems to pay any attention to it. It's strange.

**NJW:** You share your home with two cats too, but you've been really vocal about dogs. Aside from MSN, do you see problems on the cat side as well?

**BT:** I wish I could say that things are different for cats, but unfortunately it's probably worse. Nearly 70% of all cats that enter shelters across the country end up killed. And while some of these animals are lost or surrendered pets, a percentage of these cats are feral cats that cannot be adopted into homes. Because most cities don't have any type of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program in place, these feral cats are almost immediately sentenced to death.

Once again, we see that many city ordinances work are at odds with lifesaving and even actively work against it. Some cities, for example, just make it illegal for people to care for free roaming cats. Even in the case where someone is sterilizing, feeding, watering, and otherwise caring for the cats, it is against the law. And rather than partner with these compassionate caregivers, shelters are sending animal control officers to threaten them, to issue citations, to impound and kill the animals.

Some communities take a less direct approach. In my own community, they have made it illegal to feed feral cats by declaring that if you feed an animal for three consecutive days then you have de facto ownership of that animal. At that point, colony caretakers become in violation of the overly-strict pet limit laws that allow for no more than four pets.

Repealing laws that prevent people from caring for colonies of feral cats would provide a better life for feral cats, decrease shelter killings and control the population of feral cats in communities everywhere. But that isn't even on the agenda in many parts of Kansas City. And they continue to cling to the outrageous notion that the little old lady up the street feeding the stray cats is a criminal, that she should be fined, and that the cats she cares for would be better off if they were killed. It's unbelievable that I've actually seen this happen.

**NJW:** Aside from the situation you describe, what do you see as the central problems with Pet Limit Laws?

**BT:** Many cities have very harsh pet limit laws, limiting homes to no more than usually four pets per household—some as low as two. The laws are supposedly put in place to prevent neighbors from having to deal with odors or loud, habitual barking—even though there are nuisance ordinances that deal with these problem situations.

Animal welfare activists support these laws because they say that they prevent hoarders or people from getting more animals than they can properly care for. However, there are already animal cruelty laws that deal with those who don't properly care for their pets. And hoarding is a sickness that laws won't fix.

Does anyone honestly think someone with six healthy cats is a hoarder? And if the animals are properly cared for, and are not creating noise or odors in the neighborhood, then what difference does it make if someone shares their home with two pets or six pets?

Many cities are succeeding without pet limits. The directors of their animal control shelters say that a responsible owner will not have more animals than they can properly care for. An irresponsible owner won't be able to properly care for one, so the law is really useless.

The reality is that pet limit laws do nothing to increase the welfare of animals in our communities and make No Kill more difficult—even impossible. Pet limit laws take away potential homes from animals that need them. They make fostering impossible for many willing families if they wish to stay within the legal

limit of pets. All because someone has created an arbitrary number of how many animals they feel like someone should own.

What is worse is that a violation of the pet limit law means death. Families caught in violation have to re-home the pet or animal control will seize and then kill the pet. In the Kansas City metro area, our “shelters” already kill about 20,000 animals a year. Death is the outcome.

**NJW:** Where would you like the discussion in animal welfare to go from where it is?

**BT:** Building a No Kill community relies on a lot of moving parts. It relies on aggressively adopting animals out of shelters. It relies on a large network of foster homes to keep animals safe until they are able to find homes. It means keeping as many animals in their current homes as possible so we don’t have to spend time re-homing them. Many of the laws that are common in our communities make this not only more difficult, but often impossible.

I’d love for our discussions on animal welfare to move away from some the ideals that people “think will work” and focus on trying to duplicate successful programs in other places. This means in some places getting rid of some of our decade-old notions of how to run shelters. It means getting involved politically to get rid of many of the laws that work against our mission of achieving No Kill by giving animal control officers more reasons to take animals out of homes and put them into crowded shelters.

There are a lot of cities that have really great track records of success. We should be modeling ourselves after those communities and saving the lives of as many animals as possible. We should follow these successful cities’ leads and put our egos aside. Duplicating the habits of places that have not had success in achieving better public safety or dramatically reducing the number of animals killed doesn’t make any sense.

We can, and must, demand better.

*Read Brent’s blog at [www.kcdogblog.com](http://www.kcdogblog.com). The opinions expressed are those of Brent Toellner and not necessarily those of Nathan J. Winograd.*