

3) BREAKING STORIES

NATIONAL DOG BITE PREVENTION WEEK

Note: This is a breaking story because it will likely happen again next year and possibly for many years to come, albeit in different formats, and journalists can be forewarned. Put NATIONAL DOG BITE PREVENTION WEEK in your diaries now!

For several years now, the US Postal Service has been working with HSUS to try to reduce the incidence of dogs biting mail carriers. Hitherto, however, HSUS has not been publicly visible in this capacity, its role principally being to provide training programs to postal workers on how to avoid being bitten. This changed in a big way in 1995.

This year, from June 12-17, the Postal Service and HSUS jointly inaugurated National Dog Bite Prevention Week. This involved the mailing of a postcard to every business and home address in the country — all 128 million of them — at a cost of about \$15 million, in what the *Chicago Tribune* (June 16) described as the largest Postal Service mailing ever. According to Postal Service spokesman Mark Saunders (personal communication), "over 90%" of the mailing cost was borne by the Postal Service from revenues gained through stamp sales.

The postcard, entitled "Don't let your dog bite the hand that serves you!", took the form of a "tip sheet" of ways in which dog owners can reduce aggressive pet behavior and other people can avoid being bitten. Under the heading "How to be a responsible dog owner" appeared the following four tips (in order):

- Spay or neuter your dog — unneutered dogs are more likely to bite!
- When your letter carrier comes to your home, keep your dog inside, away from the door in another room or on a leash.
- Don't let your child take mail from the letter carrier in the presence of your dog. Your dog's instinct is to "protect" the family.
- Obedience training can teach your dog proper behavior and help you control your dog in any situation.

The postcard also sports the HSUS logo and its contact address for further information "about dog bite prevention and responsible pet ownership."

As Postal Service spokesman Saunders was quick to point out, dogs biting postmen is a serious issue, and one that is apt to be treated lightly by the public. "People tend to see the postmen and

dogs issue as a joke," he said, adding that, as "the top animal welfare organisation in the country," the HSUS "adds credibility." The response to this year's campaign was "overwhelmingly positive," he said.

Why should HSUS add credibility? Well, for one thing, stated a press release by the Postal Service, HSUS has been designated as "the national clearinghouse for dog bite statistics." But Norma Woolf of the National Animal Interest Alliance decided to check this claim with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, and was informed that no official repository for dog bite statistics exists, and that HSUS had simply obtained its statistics from the CDC (see "Dog Bite Prevention Campaign Pairs Post Office with Animal Rights Organization").

Woolf also took exception to the order in which tips for being a responsible dog owner appeared, the accuracy of the suggestion that spaying and neutering prevents bites, the fact that the suggestion to spay and neuter appears at the top of the list, and the fact that it dovetails nicely with HSUS's campaign against "pet overpopulation" aimed primarily at dog breeders.

"The whole project was supposedly to prevent dog bites, but what it really does is to promote the HSUS agenda," she told me.

"When we look at the list of how to be a responsible dog owner, the top thing on the list is spay and neuter your dog, and it says unneutered dogs are more likely to bite. The information for that comes from a single study done in the city of Denver several years ago. ... The information out of that study was that unneutered dogs chained in yards are more likely to bite ... The whole HSUS agenda is to get everyone to spay or neuter their dogs, so they're scaring people into doing it, basically."

And while most of the other information Woolf found to be basically sound, "if you're going to have things listed in a hierarchy, obedience training should be first, not the HSUS agenda of spay and neuter your dog."

Saunders's response was that the order in which tips appeared was random, and that he was unaware of the HSUS campaign against dog breeders.

He also admitted that a large amount of responsibility for the project rested with him personally, and was adamant that the Postal Service had not been "duped". "We approached the HSUS," he said. not the other way around.

Saunders claimed no knowledge of the HSUS's wider agenda on pets and believed the only reason for recommending spaying and neutering was because this reduced dog bites. He also argued that it was a shame to have dogs breeding when there are so many dogs in shelters that must be euthanised for want of a home.

He was not dogmatic about this, however, and seemed genuinely interested in the notion that HSUS was using messages that could be easily accepted by mainstream society to further a long-term agenda that would not be apparent to a casual observer.

The other worrying aspect of this campaign is that it provided HSUS with heavily subsidised, nationwide advertising — a tremendous coup. Not only is its name promoted by association with a quasi-public corporation, but it also gets to build a "prospect" mailing list at almost no cost. In terms of fundraising potential, the strategy is brilliant because HSUS need only service those members of the public who have already responded to the initial subsidised mailing.

In this regard, it is significant that when people applied for further information from HSUS, included with information on dog bites gleaned from the study done years previously in Denver (referred to by Woolf), was a solicitation for gifts to HSUS.

Americans for Medical Progress reported in its newsletter *News and Notes* (Vol. 2, Issue 3) that it had asked members of a Congressional oversight committee to look into this situation and make the mailing list which this campaign generated for HSUS available to any group requesting it.

Given the success of this year's campaign, Saunders informed me that there will certainly be another promotion of National Dog Bite Prevention Week next year, although the exact format has not been decided. Saunders's position of responsibility for the campaign and apparent readiness to listen to other viewpoints suggest it may be possible to prevent HSUS getting free advertising in every household in America next year.

The best quote of the whole affair came from Rachel Lamb, HSUS's director of animal care and the person with whom the Postal Service's Saunders liaises (*Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1995). In response to the suggestion that the whole campaign was an enormous waste of money, Lamb is quoted as saying:

"Some people think we're pouring too much money into educating the public on this, but they're wrong." As Lamb correctly points out, people are wrong to think HSUS is pouring money into this — it's the Postal Service. \$15 million of it.

There was also an amusing sidebar to this campaign, as reported in the same Americans for Medical Progress newsletter. By chance, a radio reporter happened to interview HSUS vice-president Michael Fox while marching in a local July 4 parade. "Fox was carrying a sign calling for freedom from leash laws," the newsletter reported, accompanied by his unleashed dog. Strangely, one of the tips circulated by the campaign to reduce dog bites was to keep dogs on leashes.

Research tip: For information on the future of National Dog Bite Prevention Week, and HSUS's role therein, call Mark Saunders of the U.S. Postal Service on (202) 268-2171.

Extracted from the HSUS-X-Files document at humanewatch.org.

References added by DogsBite.org:

Joan Giangrassie Kates, "U.S. Postal Campaign Snapping Back at Dogs to Curb Attacks on Carriers," June 16, 1995, Chicago Tribune (chicagotribune.com)

"Dog Bite Prevention Campaign Pairs Post Office with Animal Rights Organization," NAIA News, July-August 1995 (naiaonline.org)

Which Dogs Bite? A Case Control Study of Risk Factors, by Gershman KA, Sacks JJ, and Wright JC, Pediatrics, 1994 Jun;93(6 Pt 1):913-7.

2019 National Dog Bite Prevention Week tips "How to be a Responsible Dog Owner" by USPS added by DogsBite.org

- "Obedience training can teach dogs proper behavior and help owners control their dog in any situation.
- When a letter carrier comes to the home, keep dogs:
 - Inside the house or behind a fence,
 - Away from the door,
 - In another room, or
 - On a leash.
- Dogs can be protective of their territory and may interpret the actions of letter carriers as a threat. Take precautions when accepting mail in the presence of your pet.
- Dogs that haven't been properly socialized, receive little attention or handling, or are left tied-up for long periods may become biters."