

Field Trip

BY NANCY LAWSON

Chicago, Illinois

The organization: Dog Advisory Work Group (D.A.W.G.)

Year established: 1999; gained nonprofit status in 2000

Mission: Through education and advocacy, D.A.W.G. helps resolve conflicts between dog-owning residents in Chicago and their dogless counterparts. Members of D.A.W.G.'s court advocacy committee monitor and track all circuit court cases that involve animals. "It helps the community let the criminal justice system know that these cases are important," says Cynthia Bathurst, D.A.W.G.'s executive director and court advocacy chair.

Resources: D.A.W.G. has no paid staff and operates on a shoestring budget that mainly funds communications efforts. The organization has trained 700 people to be court advocates and has a large network of dog park groups.

How it started: Parks were filling up with unscooped poop. Dogs were roaming off-leash in public spaces. The problems pitted non-dog people against canine sympathizers. In stepped D.A.W.G. volunteers, headed by D.A.W.G. co-chair Stacey Hawk, who built on the success of Chicago's first dog park, Wiggly Field, by working with the park district to create more pooch-friendly areas in the city.

What else they do: D.A.W.G. volunteers have their paws in all things canine, from co-chairing a task force that developed new licensing regulations for pet daycare and grooming businesses, to working with faith-based organizations and the Chicago Police Department to teach children about proper pet care, spay/neuter, bite prevention, and—depending on the age of the participants—dogfighting's cruel toll.



Cynthia Bathurst (middle) with Extraordinary Community Service Award winners, Sia (left) and Mari Proutsos at the D.A.W.G. Court Advocates' annual "Meet, Greet, and Celebrate" in December 2007. The sisters have helped raise over 90 homeless puppies for Chicago Animal Care & Control. CHARLEEN PROPSOM

"D.A.W.G. exists not to take over other people's places, but to work with them and then fill the niches," says Bathurst.

Their best reason for tardiness: Also a consultant for The HSUS, Bathurst showed up late to a recent meeting with The HSUS's Animal Cruelty and Fighting Campaign director armed with a good excuse: A municipal police officer in Cook County had just made an arrest in a cruelty case involving a dog who'd been killed after losing a fight, but the assistant state's attorney didn't understand the need for felony charges. "Nobody at the courthouse ... knew what to do," Bathurst explained to her fellow meeting attendees. The officer turned to D.A.W.G., whose number he'd picked up at a law enforcement training event, and Bathurst faxed petitions and procedural information that helped the case proceed.

Why they're needed: Though police are often not trained in animal-related cases, officers invariably must handle them at some point. Some Chicago suburbs lack clear procedures for seizing a dog, and officers handling an abuse case are often left scratching their heads: How do they get the animal to the shelter? Who do they call? What do they do if the animal is aggressive? What do they do if an owner won't forfeit ownership, and how can they

ensure an animal doesn't sit for weeks in a cage while awaiting trial?

Because of the work and dedication of D.A.W.G.'s court advocacy volunteers, Bathurst usually has the answers. In fact, she's so full of information that Chicago police are on the phone with her almost daily, says Officer Tom Barker of the Animal Crimes Unit. D.A.W.G.'s database of cases includes all the defendants and animals who have gone through the court system. "We know all the procedures and all the problems, and they check with us on anything they need to be aware of, in terms of what's happened in the past," says Bathurst. D.A.W.G. also helps officers by serving as an educational resource for pet owners more in need of education than a trip through the criminal justice system.

Why they do it: Bathurst became interested in working to end violence after her community was rocked by a homicide. As a community policing volunteer, she developed strong relationships with local cops. Though not a dog owner herself, she values all living creatures, she says, and began to see a need still unaddressed by other agencies. "I just love to pull people together for a common cause. ... And people just came out of the woodwork. I could hardly believe it—I got pulled in because people really wanted to make a difference."