

Rescue group aims to improve animal care with 'Lucky's Law'

Submitted by Rose Egge, KOMO Communities Reporter

The truth is, I arrived at Dr. Suzanne Fiala's West Seattle office last week with some presumptions. I was going to meet Joel, a 1-year-old pit bull-mix from Burien that had been starved to half his ideal body weight until he was rescued one month ago. I love dogs, but I expected Joel would be aggressive or reclusive from his previous abuse. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Joel came inside the doctor's office after a walk and sauntered right up to me, without any fear. While I sat in front of him, he very gently put one paw on each of my shoulders and began to lick my face.

Despite the abuse he has been through, Joel is an incredibly sweet, mellow dog that craves affection. I never heard him bark, I never saw him bite. While his foster mom, Fiala, held his legs to show me his slightly deformed bones and ran her hands over the scars on his legs, Joel didn't even flinch.

Fiala believes that Joel's dramatic transformation is due to the fact that he went into foster care through local rescue group **Dogs Deserve Better** instead of a local shelter.

"This boy would not have survived with animal control, he would have come out of that cage a psychologically damaged animal, and maybe would have been put down," Fiala said.

Dogs rescued from potentially abusive situations in King County rarely go directly into foster care. To protect them as "live evidence," they are usually kept in county or city shelters while criminal cases against owners are pending.

But Dogs Deserve Better is trying to change that. The group is working with a lawyer to write "Lucky's Law," which would reinforce the legality of housing dogs in foster homes and would encourage animal control workers to turn abused animals over to a rescue group like Dogs Deserve Better immediately after an initial veterinary exam.

Lucky was a Shoreline dog found abandoned and living alone in a filthy basement back in September of 2010. The dog was initially removed from the home by King County Animal Control, but while the county was drafting a contract for Dogs Deserve Better to foster Lucky, the dog was returned to his Shoreline home.

Kelly Page, a representative for Dogs Deserve Better, would like to take more rescued dogs, like Lucky, into foster care.

"By law, when the dog comes in they have to go through a veterinary exam, then, they can go into rescue instead of a shelter, just like horses, cows or llamas are fostered," Page said. "But we have not gotten 99 percent of the dogs that we asked for."

In foster care, Page says dogs get 24/7 care from a specially selected foster parent and a network of volunteers and trainers that work one-on-one with the dog to correct any behavioral challenges. To date, the group has never had to put a dog down.

“We are saving lives by bringing them into this environment,” Page said. “Every dog can be re-socialized, it just takes the right kind of trainer and environment.”

Dogs Deserve Better also covers the costs of food, medical care, and anything else the animal might need, saving cities and counties money.

Ken Nakatsu, head of King County Animal Care and Control, explained that the county does occasionally place dogs in foster homes if they are ill or very young, but that the practice can compromise cruelty cases. If ownership of a dog is being contested the county is less likely to let them out of the shelter, and if the animal is aggressive Nakatsu says fostering it can be a liability concern

“We need to view each situation seriously,” Nakatsu said. “We consider the nature of animal involved, their injuries and the foster care parent.”

There is also the concern that by fostering dogs the county can lose live evidence. Page argues that most evidence of abuse can be collected at the dog’s initial vet exam.

Once in the King County Animal Shelter, cats are held in cages and dogs are kept in kennels, but the animals are walked and socialized by volunteers and cared for by on-site veterinarians. Still, the shelter is only open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and houses around 50 dogs and 120 cats during its slowest season. Working on a typical day are six animal control officers, two veterinary technicians, one veterinary doctor plus supervisors and field staff.

“What ends up happening is court cases get backed up and dogs suffer from a lack of socializing,” Page said. “They get ‘kennel stress’ and become aggressive.”

Fiala does not believe Joel would have survived in a shelter. On his first night with her, Joel could not stand up. He was hand-fed bites of food every 2 hours and could not digest much of it. Fiala was not sure he would make it through the night. Since then the dog has had six visits to the vet to treat his wounds and a stubborn digestive problem.

“He’s gotten a lot of personalized and expensive medical attention that I don’t think he would have experienced from animal control,” Fiala said. “I know they have a vet but they’re very overworked and understaffed and I’m sure it’s a good veterinarian but I doubt they have the time to devote to one animal the way that we do.”

Fiala hopes that, in the future, rescue groups like Dogs Deserve Better will become a natural partner with animal control.

“They should have the confidence to know that we will give the animal the care it needs that we are responsible, that they will know where that animal is at all time, that we will provide that animal to them whenever they need it for any legal proceedings and that that animal is in the best hands possible.”