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Guns Discussed

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BODY:

Loudoun County animal control officer Randy Broaddus tapped gratefully on the bulletproof vest under his uniform as he drove to answer an animal cruelty complaint in western Loudoun.

"I'd almost rather take someone's kids than their animals. It'd be safer," he said, adjusting the new vest. "People get defensive, sometimes even violent, when you try to break that bond."

Broaddus, 28, had received the complaint minutes earlier, and with little more than an address and a description of possibly neglected cows and goats, he was heading for a house in Neersville. The owners would hardly be glad to see him, and he couldn't be sure how politely he would be received.

Animal control officers statewide are trying to shake the dog-catcher stereotype. Although their roles and law enforcement powers vary from county to county, theirs is a dangerous job, said Rob Montgomery, Loudoun's animal control director, and it's not just the animals that attack.

This summer, Montgomery equipped his five officers and two supervisors with bulletproof vests, began police academy training for each of them and arranged for the installation of special software that will alert animal control officers to previous law enforcement complaints at addresses to which they've been summoned.

Someday, he hopes to be able to equip his officers with guns to defend against animal--and human--attacks on the job. "More

dogs are trained to be aggressive, and people are defensive about their animals," he said. "The risk to the officer is high." In about half of Virginia's counties, animal wardens report to a sheriff's office or police department and have law enforcement powers and, in some places, guns. In other counties, as in Loudoun, they fall under a variety of governmental organizations, including health and public works departments.

Loudoun Sheriff Stephen O. Simpson said he would like animal wardens to be trained as deputies under his authority; failing that, he does not think they should carry guns. Montgomery said he wants his wardens to be a separate--but equal--entity in the Loudoun law enforcement community.

Although there have been no reported instances of animal owners assaulting Loudoun wardens, they say they take verbal beatings regularly and fear that one day words will become actions. The FBI has documented a link between animal cruelty and other kinds of abuse and violence, and Montgomery said he has lost some animal control officers who resigned because they felt vulnerable arriving to investigate animal abuse allegations.

On the routine call to the Neersville farm two weeks ago, Broaddus was armed with a can of mace on his belt as he pulled into the driveway of a rundown house and rapped on the screen door. In an official tone softened by his slight country twang, he introduced himself: "Officer Randy Broaddus, animal control, ma'am."

From the driveway, the woman could be seen opening the door, then waving her hands animatedly before striding off toward a pasture. Broaddus said he responded to her defensive protests by assuring her that he simply was looking into a passerby's call about her livestock and wanted to make sure all was well.

After inspecting the animals, he said that dairy cows and goats are typically thinner than livestock being fattened for slaughter and that the protruding hip bones that had alarmed the caller did not indicate malnutrition or neglect. Then Broaddus, who has a cattle and hay farm near Leesburg, and the woman got into a farmer-to-farmer conversation about the merits of goat's milk before he thanked her and left.

Loudoun's animal control officers field more than 250 complaints of dog bites, dangerous animals and animal cruelty each month. Some of those calls can require as many as a dozen follow-up visits, so officers spend most of their time behind the wheel--

patrolling, responding to complaints and checking on places where there have been previous complaints.

"We send people blindly to a complaint, not knowing if the place was the site of a drug bust earlier or if someone is hotheaded after an altercation," Montgomery said. "I wouldn't want to do their job without protection."

Montgomery is sending his officers to the police academy to be trained in dealing with difficult situations: when to stand their ground, when to run. In addition, he said, the training will prepare his officers if they are ever permitted to carry side arms and take on more law enforcement roles.

But Simpson said that even with more training--which he applauds--he would not be comfortable giving firearms to wardens. "The more training, the better, but you have to be careful how you use that," Simpson said. "There are a lot of things that need to be ironed out before we give them guns." "There are philosophical differences between a cop and an animal warden," Montgomery said. "We want our wardens to act in an educational, helpful realm, but when they need to go into cop mode, they need the power to do that."

Broaddus said most of the visits he and other animal control officers make are more informational than confrontational. When a garbage truck caught fire in a Countryside office park last week and oil spilled into a nearby pond, animal control officers arrived to rescue the ducks swimming in the slick waters. Hands on hips, officers Margo Meder and Donald Longerbeam surveyed the rainbow sheen of diesel fuel and hydraulic oil on the pond's surface. As onlookers from nearby offices asked questions, Longerbeam described how oil can kill wildlife and explained the rescue operation.

"I'm just glad you're here," one woman said.

Despite the thanks, Meder said she does not think that animal control officers are considered equal among the emergency services, whose personnel had put out the fire and investigated its cause.

"We're right here with the other fire and rescue officers, but we're not treated with the same respect as sheriffs, and we should be," Meder said. "We do different things, but we do enforce laws, just animal laws."

Mark Kumpf, president of the Virginia Animal Control Association, said there is interest in a statewide plan to place all animal

control offices under county law enforcement umbrellas--but, he hopes, with separate duties.

"Most of us in animal control don't want to be cops. We do handle law enforcement, and we need training, however," he said. "Drug dealers don't care what badge or what uniform you are wearing. They treat you like police, and you need to be protected."

Kumpf noted that despite the potential dangers for animal control field officers, the issue is not receiving much attention. "It's a low issue on the totem pole for most jurisdictions. But from a liability standpoint, the counties should treat this seriously."

Loudoun County Administrator Kirby M. Bowers said neither Montgomery nor Simpson has made any formal request regarding the status of animal wardens.

Meanwhile, the two agencies continue to work together. If animal control needs sheriff's assistance, they are there immediately, said animal control officer Janette Reeve. "They are great," she said. "They are very protective of us."

Reeve, 30, who patrols the Sterling area, said that although Loudoun is much more peaceable than Washington, where she used to work, she deals with similar complaints.

As she patrolled a quiet neighborhood last week, she received a Code 8 call on her radio--a dog running at large--and raced to Ashburn, where a Rottweiler had escaped from the basement of a house under construction.

By the time she and two other animal officers had arrived, the Rottweiler's owner had corralled it and confined it again, but alarmed and angry neighbors were out in force. Earlier this summer, the owner had been summoned to court after one of his two Rottweilers had bitten a girl, and, because it could not be determined which dog did the biting, both were determined to be dangerous and required to be confined.

After interviewing the owner and several neighbors and making sure the dogs were locked up, the officers returned to their rounds, assuring the crowd that they would file a complete report.

Animal Watch, a Sunday feature that gives readers a look at the Department of Animal Care and Control's log, starts today on Page 19.

