

## **Leash Laws and Roaming Dogs**

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It never ceases to amaze me how many people blatantly ignore leash laws or allow their dogs to roam at large. I have observed a man walking a pit bull-type puppy along busy Dale Boulevard (main, four-lane road through part of congested Northern, Virginia). He rarely has a leash on the pup. What if something startles the pup and he darts into traffic? We have a family who allows their Chihuahua cross run loose throughout the neighborhood. I have had many narrow escapes with the dog as it darted out into the street as I was driving by. Due to the number of children locally, I drive well below the speed limit as is. However, at night, due to cars along the side of the road and the fact that this dog is the color of fallen leaves and sometimes plays in piles next to the street, he is very difficult to see at time. Another family in my area has a dog that religiously escapes the yard. The fence is far too low to safely contain the dog.

Many people feel their dogs are 100% trustworthy off lead or that leads are a hassle, etc. Others feel that dogs should be able to roam the neighborhood as opposed to being in a yard. Others may not realize the dog is escaping as it is there when they leave for the day and there when they return (hopefully). Dogs have a good internal clock and I am known more than one dog to disappear after the owner has left for work and return well before the owner comes home. Leash laws and laws to restrict the roaming of dogs are vital for the safety of the dog as well as the general public. Let us look at why.

If your dog is safely leashed as well as securely confined to a house and yard when at home, your dog is far safer than if running loose. There are many, many dangers to dogs allowed to run loose. Most people only think of cars and trucks as risks to roaming dogs. However, there are many others. For example, poisons (like antifreeze and other car fluids that collect in puddles). There are irate humans that pose a risk to roaming dogs trespassing on their property. I have known commercial rabbit raisers and small farmers who had severe problems with loose dogs killing livestock. The owners ignored pleas of the neighbors and animal control's warnings. The people were forced to set out poison to stop the dogs. It was that or continual loss of livestock and revenue. Loose dogs can get into fights with other animals. Some may carry things like the deadly rabies virus. Skunks and porcupines can be found in both rural and suburban areas. The list of risks to loose dogs goes on.

No dog is ever 100% trustworthy off lead – not even the best-trained dog. Dogs are still dogs. They may forget their training when scared or wishing to give chase to something. Even people who regularly compete in dog sports whose dogs work off lead understand this. Their dogs are kept safe when not competing or training. They are on leash or safely on the property when not.

Loose dogs are a risk to the community. That sweet pup at home can act very differently when away from you. That cuddly bumpkin can become the neighborhood terror and give

chase to anyone he sees. Dogs may pack up and cause serious injury and mayhem. Examples of this come from two animal control officers I knew when living up North. One case included two Huskies. Beloved and sweet pets when at home. However, the dogs were allowed to roam loose. They began going to neighboring homes and attacking sheep. Animal control responded numerous times and spoke to the owners. Sadly, the owners did not take her warnings. One dog was found over a bloody carcass, other sheep were injured. The owner of the sheep witnessed the dogs in action. Animal Control had no other recourse. This dog now had to be destroyed. The other dog was confiscated. This double tragedy (loss of sheep and loss of pets) was because the owners felt they were above the law and their pets could do no harm when roaming.

Loose dogs have been known to attack humans. In one Boston, MA suburb where I lived as a child, family pets allowed to run loose packed up regularly. Many residents received injuries not to mention the destruction to property. The community was in fear. The dogs ranged from small to large. Different breeds and crosses made up this pack. Owners blatantly ignored the laws were putting an entire community at risk. There was a call for all the dogs to be rounded up and destroyed because the owners refused to follow the law.

Roaming dogs spread waste and disease. Fecal matter is a great vector for parasites and illness. It is bad enough dealing with people who walk their dogs and fail to clean up after them, but even more annoying when the owners allow their dogs to run loose and soil other yards, sidewalks, parks, etc.

What can the average resident do if there is a loose dog issue? If you know the owner, you can educate them about local dog laws. Be nice, polite and give the benefit of the doubt. One new family on my street had NO idea of the leash law in our county. Once I nicely informed them and offered to get an extra lead from my class supplies if they needed one, I have yet to see their dog off lead. However, this can be dangerous. Not all dog owners like neighbors getting into their faces and telling them how to manage their dogs. Some can get very irate. The best thing you can do is get a good description of the dog and address where it lives and even pictures of the roaming dog if you can. Next, alert animal control. They can try to catch the dog and educate the owners. Not only is being caught safer for the dog, but it is safer for the community. If the owners do not care, maybe they do not deserve to have the dog in the first place. Animal Control can help the dog find a better home if the dog can be put up for adoption. Animal Control Officers are all about public and pet safety.

Leash laws and other laws designed to prevent roaming dog laws are here for a reason. As responsible dog owners, it is our duty to follow them. Even if your community has no laws, we still need to think about safety. If not, we are not only putting our dogs but also our community at risk.