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Volunteers out to help pit bulls and people

• **Oakland event caters to low-income residents, encourages owners to have their pets fixed**

By **John Simerman**
STAFF WRITER
Article Launched: 03/31/2008 03:01:53 AM PDT

OAKLAND -- In the parking lot of Eastmont Mall on Sunday, Donna Reynolds strapped a new collar on a tough-looking pup, and then launched her pitch at his young owner.

"He's going to get real strong," she said. "We can help you with training. If you're up for it, you'll look like a superstar. You'll walk down the street, she'll do whatever you want."

She handed him a card with details, and then scanned the jagged line. Hundreds of pet owners and their charges -- mostly pit bulls and Chihuahuas -- stood waiting, many for hours, for free vaccinations and spay/neuter vouchers.

That time-honored sales tactic -- offer something free, then sell -- is what a pair of East Bay animal groups are using to offer education and support to low-income dog owners, aiming to slow rampant overbreeding and prevent cruelty.

Pit bulls make up half the animals that find their way to the Oakland animal shelter, and two-thirds of those are euthanized, shelter officials say.

"The population, it is getting crazy," said Jimmy Bourda of Oakland, who stood in line with Moo Moo, a 16-month-old pit with black-and-white, cowlike patches.

The East Bay SPCA and Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls, or BAD RAP, hold the events three times a year in East and West Oakland, which are pit bull hot spots.

"They've got other pressures upon them, feeding their families, mortgages. We want to make sure they can take care of their pets. They want to take care of their pets," said

Eliza Fried of the East Bay SPCA.

"The free isn't the best part of it. It's the offering," said Arikha Jay of Oakland, as she watched over Yochee, a gray female pit bull. "They got it available in an area where there's lots of dogs."

Reynolds, who nine years ago founded BAD RAP with her husband, Tim Racer, said they favor "honey rather than vinegar," encouragement rather than harsh judgment or breed-specific laws.

About 2,000 pits have been fixed through the events since they began three years ago, she said.

Culture can get in the way. In Oakland, owners of fixed dogs get steep breaks -- as much as \$150 off -- on shots and licenses, and the East Bay SPCA fixes pit bulls for free in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Still, many owners -- Latinos, in particular



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"There's a lot of belief that it's losing manhood," said Berenice Mora of Concord, a BAD RAP volunteer who helps bridge the language barrier. "I usually just try to plant a seed."

The group offers free collars in exchange for the chains that owners often strap on their dogs. Scars show on a few. High-profile attacks and cases like the Michael Vick dogfighting scandal have dogged the pit bull's image. On Sunday, owners defended a breed known for its loyalty.

"It matters how you raise them," said Vernon Hebert, who stood with his son, Josh, and young Rocko. "He won't be around any of that fighting crap. He's a family dog."

Sunday's event highlighted a huge rise in another breed entirely: the jumpy, pocket-sized Chihuahua. Backyard breeding of Chihuahuas is no small matter, said Allison Lindquist, executive director of the East Bay SPCA. They tend to bite, and owners often tire of them and give them up.

"The Chihuahua is becoming the new pit bull. They're such a popular breed," she said. "They're temperamental, unstable. I'll take 20 pit bulls over a cranky Chihuahua anytime."

Reach John Simerman at 925-943-8072 or jsimerman@bayareanewsgroup.com.

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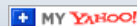
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