

Near Miss Pit Bulls & Hostile Customers

Description of Incident:

On Friday, November 2, 2012, as a Meter Reader was driving to his route in a rural area, he noticed a dog chained near the meter and a Saint Bernard loose in the front yard at the first house he planned to read. The dog's owner was not present, so to avoid a potential incident with the dogs, the employee parked his vehicle and proceeded to the house on the other side of the road. Being familiar with the route, the employee was aware that the residents at the second house also owned dogs so he approached with caution as the Saint Bernard barked at him from the other side of the road. The dogs at the second house were not outside, and as the employee was reading the meter near the corner of the house, he heard the front door open and he yelled out, "Don't let the dogs out!" The customer proceeded to leave the front door open and 3 pit bulls quickly entered the front yard and began barking at the employee. The employee assumed an assertive posture and spoke in a commanding tone as he had been instructed during dog bite prevention training. He urged the customer to take the dogs back in to the house, but the customer refused saying that the dogs would not bite and told the employee that the dogs were "babies." The employee insisted that the customer take the dogs back in the house as the customer began to argue with him claiming that his dogs were not dangerous. Explaining the Company's requirements pertaining to dogs, the employee continued to insist the dogs be put away and the owner eventually led the dogs back in to the house. During the incident, the customer told our employee, "I let them out so you would see they are nice dogs." In response to one of the employee requests to put the dogs inside, the customer said, "***** !!! You can't tell me what to do on my property!" Before the employee left the property, tensions with the customer diminished and it appeared the customer understood why the employee insisted so strongly that the dogs be put away.

The employee then proceeded to walk from house-to-house reading the other meters in the area. When he returned to his vehicle, the resident of the house with the Saint Bernard who was not involved in the initial altercation approached the employee and began to taunt him saying, "Are you afraid of 3 little pit bulls? Come on over to my house. My dog will tear you apart.....he will rip you to shreds." During the exchange, he also called the employee an "*****." The owner of the pit bulls witnessed this incident and after the owner of the Saint Bernard left, he apologized to the employee on behalf of his neighbor. The employee called his supervisor to report the incident and proceeded to his next stop.

About 2 hours later and about 3 miles from the site of the incident with the customers and dogs, the employee arrived at a house to read a meter. As he walked up the driveway toward the house, he noticed a man and a woman near the home. The employee greeted the individuals as he approached then realized that the man was the owner of the Saint Bernard. The man glared at the employee and appeared to be inviting a confrontation while the woman asked the employee if he was there to shut her gas off. The employee explained that he was only there to read the meter. After reading the meter, the employee left the property immediately.

Root Causes:

1. The customers were unaware of, or unwilling to comply with Company rules regarding dog bite prevention and employee safety. Prior to an employee entering a home or property, the Company requires all dogs be placed in a secure location. This requirement has been communicated via bill messages and in person by employees. Most dog owners believe their dogs would never bite, but in fact injuries from dog bites have been one of the leading causes of OSHA recordable injuries for many years.
2. Hostile customer. It appears the owner of the Saint Bernard was looking for a fight and tried to provoke a confrontation with the employee following the incident with the pit bulls at his neighbor's house.

Additional Information:

When startled by the sudden appearance of 3 pit bulls, the employee's training kicked in. During dog bite prevention training, employees were instructed to assume an assertive posture, speak in a commanding tone, and keep the dogs in front of them at all times. Pit bulls and similar breeds can be particularly dangerous when there are two or more together since they don't conform to normal hierarchies and tend to act aggressively. The intuitive reaction to run from a dog is often the worst response since this can trigger a dog's "chase" instinct and it is usually not possible for a human being to outrun a dog. In this incident, the employee responded appropriately by insisting that the owner put the dogs in a secure location.

Action Plan to Prevent Recurrence:

1. Operation supervisor and a representative from the Security Department to meet with the customer who threatened our employee to explain our requirements and set expectations for the future.
2. Company is pursuing additional options for conveying dog safety requirement to customers.