

FACT SHEET



Limiting Attack Dogs in Prisons - 2024

Problem: Virginia’s prisons use attack dogs to subdue and intimidate incarcerated people in ways that are unnecessary, dangerous and barbaric.

Solution: Virginia should prohibit the use of attack dogs for prison extractions and limit the use for most other situations. Delegate Webert (R-Fauquier County) will introduce a bill requiring the Department of Corrections to develop policies to address this problem.

Background: Most states have eliminated the use of attack-trained canines in handling people who are incarcerated. Virginia is one of eight states that continues to use attack-dogs to “manage” people. (1) (Using drug-sniffing dogs to search for drugs is a widely used and acceptable practice. These are different dogs than those used to attack people.)

A 2023 report based on reviewing public-records requests, court documents, medical records and interviews with dozens of bite victims identified 295 incidents of attack-trained dogs biting incarcerated people over the six years from 2017-2022. Most of those attacks (92 percent) – 271 attacks – were in Virginia. (2) Why is Virginia so far ahead in this barbaric practice?

Attack dogs are primarily used in Virginia’s six high security prisons: Keen Mountain Correctional Center, Sussex I and Sussex II Correctional Centers, River North Correctional Center, Red Onion State Prison, and Wallens Ridge State Prison.(3)

Although some claim that attack dogs are needed for prison security, corrections professionals argue that attack dogs should not be needed if prisons are well managed. Human Rights Watch says, “The goal of protecting staff or deterring inmate misconduct cannot justify the use of dogs to terrorize and even bite prisoners. Security and control can be maintained while treating inmates at all times, and in all circumstances, decently, humanely, and justly.” (4)

Americans were horrified upon seeing videos and photos of the U.S. military abusing prisoners in Iraq, including terrorizing them with attack dogs. Virginians are horrified to learn that its prisons terrorize people with attack dogs too.

Why should Virginia Limit the Use of Attack Dogs?

Attack dogs aren’t necessary. There are no studies that show that attack dogs make prisons safer. Most states manage to operate safely without attack dogs. Many documented cases of dog bites are from incarcerated people who were bitten while prone, meaning they were on the ground already.

Attack dogs injure incarcerated people. Prisons are supposed to be the guardians of those under their care. Dog bites are severe, sometimes permanently disabling and disfiguring. Many victims of attack dog bites experience long-term trauma.(5)

Attack dogs injure correctional officers. Dogs trained to attack incarcerated people sometimes attack their handlers as well. These dogs are highly stressed. In 2022, dog handlers were bit at Wallens Ridge, Sussex I and River North.

Using attack dogs reflects Virginia’s racist history. Given Virginia’s history of slave owners using dogs during enslavement and police officers during the Jim Crow eras, Virginia’s excessive use of dogs is particularly concerning. Seven Black men attacked by prison dogs in Virginia’s prisons from 2011 to 2022 allege that corrections officers yelled racial slurs or taunts during or immediately after the attacks.(6)

Prisons should create good neighbors. Eighty-five percent of those who are incarcerated return to society. (6) How they are treated inside of prisons affects how they will return as our neighbors. Virginia should seek to return those who have served their time as emotionally sound and well-educated as possible. Attack-dogs do not help build public safety.

Virginia Can Do Better: Virginia was the first southern state to abolish the death penalty. In 2023, Virginia placed some needed limits on solitary confinement. Now, Virginia should limit the use of attack dogs in its prisons.

1, 2, 3, 5 – Hannah Beckler, *Patrol dogs are terrorizing and mauling prisoners inside the United States*, *Insider*, July 23, 2023.

4 – Human Rights Watch, *Cruel and Degrading: The Use of Dogs for Cell Extractions in U.S. Prisons*, October 9, 2006.

6 – Ashley Nellis, *No End in Sight: US’s Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment*, The Sentencing Project, March 5, 2021.