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Mediators help take bite out of dog disputes

By Edythe Jensen, Dennis Wagner and Drew FitzGerald

After waking up every weekday at 6:30 a.m. to the sound of her neighbor's border collie barking through the fence, Karen Cliffe, 66, says she had almost given up.

Cliffe says a man living next to her home in San Francisco's Mission District had ignored her requests to keep the dog inside. Then, a friend suggested Cliffe use Community Boards, a local non-profit mediation service, to intervene. "I had very little hope," Cliffe says. "If the guy wouldn't talk to me, why would he go and talk to a third party?"

He did, and an agreement was worked out in November, said Community Board moderator Liora Kahn. The neighbor, who said he had needed to let the dog out before he went to work, agreed to have a third neighbor let the dog out later.

Neighbors with conflicts over barking dogs can increasingly turn to mediation. From Honolulu to Phoenix to New Jersey, hundreds of governments nationwide offer mediation to resolve noise and other neighborhood disputes.

The National Association for Community Mediation reports there are more than 550 mediation centers in America. The services are usually free and operated by non-profit agencies or city volunteers. Mediators handle an estimated 97,500 referrals each year, the association reports.

In Chandler, AZ, a program known as Solve-it! Has arbitrated more than 150 dog-barking cases since 2007, coordinator Wendy Hollingshead said. Students from the Phoenix School of Law began a free barking-dog mediation service in January.

"It's definitely getting worse because we're getting more people jammed into less space," said Craig Mixon, an education psychologist in Sonoma, Calif, who created barkingdogs.net five years ago when he had to deal with a barking dog. The site offers information and options for people bothered by noisy dogs. Mixon says mediation is a "terrible idea" because it presumes the victim must accept some kind of compromise.

Sometimes mediation can save time and money. Chris and Kara Horrocks of Phoenix said they spent more than \$1,000 defending their Labrador, Machiato, from a neighbor's complaint last year that they violated an anti-barking law. Jennifer and Jeffrey Sofka, also of Phoenix, paid a \$286 fine because of their barking dogs.

"It was our first offense," Jennifer Sofka said. There should have been some kind of mediation first."