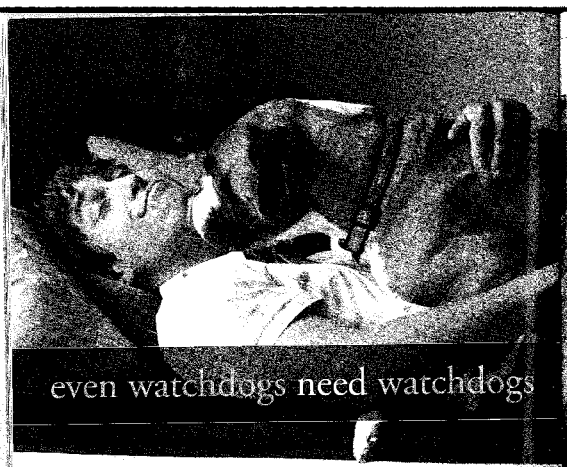

even watchdogs need watchdogs

Animals enrich our lives in so many ways. They give us joy, protection, companionship, and unconditional love.

But they need our help too. Join us in confronting animal cruelty in all its forms. Visit **humanesociety.org** to find out what you can do.

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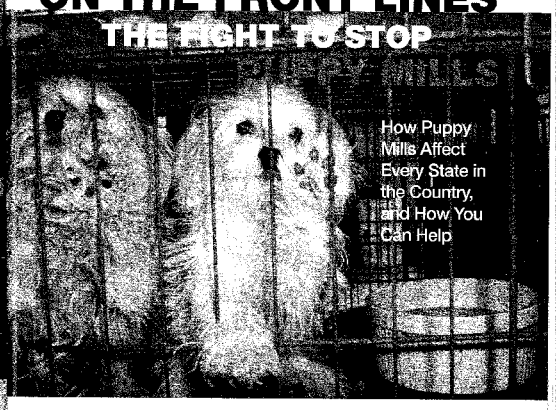
# ON THE FRONT LINES

## THE FIGHT TO STOP PUPPY MILLS



How Puppy Mills Affect Every State in the Country, and How You Can Help

By Kathleen Summers

### MORE THAN A BACK YARD BREEDER

It was a chilly October day in suburban Virginia. As I stood stranded, underfoot at "Karen," an undercover investigation with The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), climbed a hill behind a modest ranch house on a residential street. A rear door, frame in the dense of the fitted back yard, post-nursing appliances and overgrown weeds. The further they got from the front yard, the more unkempt the premises appeared. Karen could see outdoor dog cages in the distance that resembled soldiers' camps. But the man stopped in front of an OK corral.

"This is where we keep the puppies," the man said. As he swung the door open, strong crime fumes engulfed Karen. She stepped across the rotting wooden floorboards and into the whelping area. Several mother dogs with nursing puppies beneath them blinked in the sudden shock of sunlight. They were standing in wooden stalls no wider than a bicycle's handlebars, stalls with wooden floors that had clearly seized up decades ago in rotting feces and would be impossible to adequately clean. A mother Pomeranian began to dance around, nearly stepping on her puppy in eager expectation of being fed. Or perhaps she was simply mesmerized by the sudden gift of sunlight and fresh air. Karen was told that the dog's single puppy was the only one to survive litter so far survived.

Some people assume puppy mills are located only in Missouri or Pennsylvania, or in large barns of furniture where hundreds of dogs are raised. But The HSUS investigation in Virginia last year proved that hundreds of puppy mills exist in backyards, basements, and even in suburban back yards, even in states that aren't well known for having a puppy mill problem. The investigation found over 900 dog breeders selling commercially in Virginia, most of them unlicensed and unmonitored by any oversight agency.





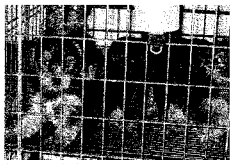
### WHAT IS A PUPPY MILL?

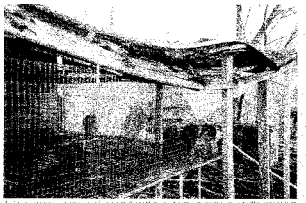
Puppy mills are dog-breeding operations. Just put profit above the welfare of dogs. Most puppy mill dogs are "housed" in horrifyingly poor conditions, especially for breeding dogs, who are kept in cages for their entire lives, without human companionship and with little hope of ever joining a family. After they become too old or sick to churn out puppies, the breeding dogs are discarded or discarded. Millions of puppies are churned out by puppy mills every year, adding to the pet overpopulation that 60s our nation's animal shelters.

Puppy mills sell their "products" to unsuspecting consumers in pet stores, over the Internet, and through newspaper classified advertisements. Many of the puppies have serious behavioral and health problems that might not be apparent, the months—problems that can cost thousands of dollars to treat, if treatable at all.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) licenses and inspects some puppy mills for violations of the Animal Welfare Act, and some states have laws to protect the animals. But puppy mills can get around USDA licensing requirements by selling directly to consumers, and many simply rely on the outward reach of the law—with so few inspectors and only minor fines in place, it's often easy for puppy mills to stay in business despite horrific conditions.

But regardless of where they originate, most puppy mill dogs don't stay in their state of origin. A pipeline of dealers and transporters supply the animals to consumers all over the country, through pet stores, brokers, newspaper ads, online auction sites and other Internet sites. The bottom line is an elusive industry that affects dogs and dog lovers in every state.





### A VICTORY IN THE SOUTH

The HSUS Virginia investigation led to promising changes in the state. In November 2007, The HSUS teamed up with local authorities, Virginia animal welfare groups and local citizens to remove nearly 1,000 dogs from a puppy mill in Hillsville, Virginia that had been uncovered as part of the investigation. The puppy mill rescue was the largest of its kind in U.S. history. The breeder is currently facing animal cruelty charges.

Public outcry continued in Virginia after the raid, and in April 2008, Virginia became the first state in the nation to limit the number of dogs held in puppy mills. The new law makes it illegal to maintain more than 50 cogs over the age of one year. The law includes other provisions to help improve conditions for Virginia's breeding dogs, including requiring annual veterinary exams for breeding dogs and limiting the age at which dogs can be bred.

Legislation alone will not solve Virginia's puppy mill problem, but the victories of the new legislation proves that public outcry

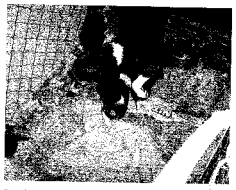
can make a difference in the lives of animals. In the coming year, many other states will examine legislation designed to improve standards of care or reduce the number of dogs held in commercial breeding facilities.

### WHY CAN'T WE MAKE THEM ALL ILLEGAL?

Legislation is key to ensuring lasting change for animals. But just passing a law to ban puppy mills—as Sen. Barack Obama proposed—isn't that easy. Anyone who has worked on legislation can tell you that bringing a bill from an idea into a law is a long and difficult process.

In 1966 Congress passed the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), which outlines specific minimum standards of care for dogs, cats, and some other kinds of animals bred for commercial sale. Under the AWA, certain large-scale commercial breeders are required to be licensed and regularly inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). But there are many loopholes in the system, and enforcement is spotty at best because of too few inspections. Over the years The HSUS has encouraged better staffing and funding for USDA inspection programs in order to increase enforcement capacity.

On the federal level, The HSUS supports closing the loopholes in the Animal Welfare Act by expanding its reach to apply to every breeder who sells large numbers of dogs, not just those who sell wholesale.



Every large-scale dog breeder should be federally inspected at least once (preferably two or more times) a year and their license should be revoked when found guilty of repeated violations. While past attempts to pass these enhancements to the AWA have not yet been successful, recent media attention to the puppy mills issue has fired up a nation of dog lovers, and now is the time to write to legislators in support of these changes.

Another remarkably violent concern is why substandard puppy mills are not simply shut down and the owners convicted under

animal cruelty laws. While all 50 states have anti-cruelty laws, often the laws are not applied to puppy mills as long as the owners have the rudimentary basics of shelter, food and water; in other words, often the law views puppy mill dogs as agricultural "crops" and not as pets. Closing down a puppy mill may seem like an easy solution, but the disaster-like resources required to rescue and care for hundreds of confiscated animals is often beyond the resources of local humane societies and other enforcement agencies. When large numbers of animals are seized from a puppy mill, the cost of veterinary care, feeding, and housing as many dogs can add up to tens of thousands of dollars just for the first few weeks of care – and in a court case follows, the dogs may need to be sheltered for months or even years. Many local humane societies or animal control agencies simply can't afford it.

Despite these difficulties, the Virginia victory proves that change is possible and that concerned citizens are ready to make a difference. But laws are only as effective as their enforcement. The fastest way to stop puppy mills is for dog lovers to stop buying their puppies.

## ON THE INTERNET, NO ONE KNOWS YOU'RE A PUPPY MILL

There is a popular cartoon that shows a dog sitting in front a home computer, presumably surfing the web. It says to his friend, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." Unfortunately, on the Internet, it's also easy to hide the fact that you're a puppy mill.

Today's puppy mills constitute a multi-million-dollar industry that dupes puppy buyers with flashy websites, official-looking registration papers, empty "guarantees" and smooth-tal ding salespeople. Pet store and Internet buyers are assured again and again that they are getting a healthy puppy from a "responsible breeder." In fact, buyers often end up acquiring a puppy mill, and take home a puppy who becomes seriously ill or even dies shortly after purchase. The HSUS receives complaints every day from puppy buyers who have been duped by deceptive sales practices.

Late last year, the HSUS's investigation of a trendy Hollywood "pet store to the stars" demonstrated that even the poshest and priciest pet stores are selling puppy mill puppies. The store proclaimed on its website (and also to its customers in person) that its puppies all come from small hobby breeders, not puppy mills. But HSUS investigators visited five of Pets of Be. Air's breeders at random and found all of them to be puppy mills. Investigators documented 100 or more dogs living in continual confinement and filth; healthy, some of them suffering from injuries, others pacing madly back and forth in their cages. The investigation showed that Pets of Bel Air is no exception to the rule: the vast majority of pet stores are supplied by puppy mills.

As long as the public continues to buy puppies from pet stores, over the Internet or from any breeder they have not carefully screened, met with in person and visited their operations, the lines of supply and demand will supply – and a new puppy mill will spring up wherever an old one is shut down. Dog lovers hold the real power to put an end to the industry, by being more careful buyers – or better yet, choosing to adopt a pet instead.

## WHAT DOG LOVERS *CAN* DO TO HELP

- **Contact your federal legislators and encourage them to crack down on puppy mills.** Ask them to sponsor legislation that would amend the intent of the Animal Welfare Act to include all dog sales businesses to be federally licensed and inspected and to increase the number of inspectors. To find out how to contact your elected officials or how to lobby for the animals, visit humanesociety.org.

SEE BELOW FOR SPECIFIC CONTACT INFO FOR COLORADO OFFICIALS.

- **Puppy mills thrive because impulsive or uninformed buyers continue to support them.** Write a letter to the editor of your local paper to help educate other dog lovers. A simple letter to the editor can be based on humanesocietyorg/puppymills.
- **Contact local shelters and humane societies to see what they are doing in your area and what specific help they need.** Puppy mill dogs and other animals in need find their way into shelters every day and these organizations often need volunteers, foster homes, fundraising assistance and many other kinds of support. You can look at your local shelter and humane organizations by zip code at www.petfinder.com.
- **Consider adoption your best option.** Not necessarily in exchange for a dog which may mean your shelter's dogs will remain in need, but instead of buying, be a good buyer. In fact, the dog of your dreams may be waiting by petfinder.com or www.petfinder.com.
- **Do your own inspections.** By choosing to buy any pet without you have personally visited the breeder's facility and examined the conditions for yourself. That means never buying a pet over the Internet or in a pet store, or from any person who refuses to show you the sand terrible which of their dogs are living. The HSUS provides several guides for the public to help them find and identify a good dog breeder, including our Puppy Buyer's Guide and our Breed Specific Breeder Checklist. These are available for free at humanesociety.org/puppymills or as well from The HSUS, Puppy Buyer's Guide, 2100 L Street NW, Washington, DC 20037.

## COLORADO

Some states, such as Colorado, have enacted laws specifically aimed at puppy mills. But unfortunately, many puppy mills do not meet the qualifications for protection by the state's laws, because they are not licensed and inspected as pet dealers. Yet, puppy mills do fall within the scope of the Federal Animal Welfare Act, and so owners of puppy mills are required to be licensed as pet dealers and to adhere to the Act's minimum standards for the care of their pet dogs.

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Kathleen Summers is a puppy mills expert for the Humane Society of the United States.