

Puppy mills face greater scrutiny

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Enlarge By Clay Myers, Bestfriends.org

These dogs were acquired by the Best Friends Society of New York when a puppy mill in Virginia went out of business.

By **Sharon L. Peters**, Special for USA TODAY

On a misty night in October, dogs by the dozens — some heavily pregnant, some nursing puppies — were placed in crates and carted to waiting vehicles. By dawn, 179 Chihuahuas, poodles, beagles and other breeds had been removed from a Bland County, Va., barn and readied for transport by Best Friends Animal Society to a care center in New York.

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Weeks earlier, Maine authorities seized 249 ailing purebred dogs and puppies, including Shelties, pugs and German shepherds, from a windowless barn in rural Buxton. Neighbors and passersby had no idea dogs lived there.

The 428 dogs — and the litters born almost daily in subsequent weeks — were extracted from a huge industry devoted to high-volume, low-cost puppy production.

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Operating under the radar and spreading fast, such operations, commonly referred to as puppy mills, have now moved into the crosshairs of welfare groups and animal lovers.

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"Many people believe that (puppy mills) is an old problem that had been taken care of years ago," says Stephanie Shain of the Humane Society of the United States. "Even people who pay attention to animal issues don't understand how much it has grown."

The Humane Society has identified puppy mills as "one of our five top" issues, Shain says. The group is pressing for more stringent oversight and has readied a unit that responds with people and equipment to large seizures, as in the Maine case, for which local agencies don't have the necessary resources.

Ed Sayres, president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), calls mills "one of the most offensive forms of animal cruelty" and says his group will continue to push for "stronger dog breeding regulations" and consumer awareness.

The Humane Society estimates that at least 10,000 U.S. puppy mills, most of them unlicensed and unmonitored, are producing up to 4 million puppies a year. "That's about twice as many as in the mid-'90s," says the ASPCA's Bob Baker, who has investigated such mills since 1980.

The spike, experts say, is the result of a confluence of factors: sales over the Internet, where some fictional Web pages emphasize home breeding and country surroundings; a major drift toward breeding by many in Amish and Mennonite families, who sell puppies at flea markets or to brokers who supply pet stores; and a recent surge of factory-style breeding in Maine, Ohio and other states previously not regarded as puppy-mill areas.

Often, Baker says, "they're keeping breeding stock in squalid, horrible conditions for their entire short lives and producing unhealthy, substandard puppies with genetic, behavior and psychological issues." And that, he says, makes this not only an issue of "inhumane care" but also of consumer fraud.

Some puppy mills are small operations: 20 or so breeding dogs live in basements, garages or sheds "in cages stacked to the roof," and remain there, without exercise or sunlight, having two litters a year until they "wear out" at about age 5, Shain says. Others are huge. Hundreds of dogs producing thousands of puppies live in relative darkness and without stimulation so they rarely bark and attract attention.

In either case, the breeder dogs get little or no medical care, experts say. Most of the females are dissipated from the endless cycle of producing and nursing litters; many have chronic ailments, rotten teeth, and ear, eye and skin infections.

"You can just imagine how healthy and well-adjusted puppies born of these animals are," Shain says. They have a high incidence of genetic disorders and diseases, and problems that emerge months or years after purchase, she says.

Females that no longer produce large litters are "let loose in the fields," killed or starved to death or sold at auctions where for \$20 to \$200 other millers buy them to get one more litter, or research facilities take them, Shain says.

The Kanab, Utah-based Best Friends purchased the Virginia dogs, says general counsel Russ Mead, after learning the Amish breeder, unwilling to install upgrades the county demanded after a March fire killed nearly 200 of his animals, intended to auction them.

The breeder, Ivan Schmucker Jr., told the *Roanoke Times* the decision to sell the dogs was hard for his family. "It's not that easy to walk away from it," he told the newspaper. "We don't feel very popular."

Eilene Ribbens Rohde, who heads The Wisconsin Puppy Mill Project, which is pressing for state oversight, is concerned that consumers might think tales of puppy-mill horrors are exaggerated. So her group bought 80 of 240 puppy mill dogs auctioned in March and documented their ailments.

"Two were OK," says Rohde, an Elkhart Lake innkeeper who became an activist after buying a hopelessly damaged Dalmatian at the mall. All the other auction dogs had "some malady or multiple issues," including conjunctivitis, parasites, cysts, staph infection, hernia, heart murmur, heartworm, yeast infections, ear mites and brucellosis, a bacterial infection that can cause flulike symptoms in humans.

Two were euthanized. The rest were treated and adopted. "Most are doing quite well," she says.

Only a fraction of the nation's high-volume breeding operations are USDA-licensed and subjected to occasional inspections. A few states have passed laws to have more oversight over puppy mills.

The Maine seizure came after consumers complained puppies purchased from J'aime Kennel arrived sick, says Norma Worley, director of the state's animal welfare program. After officers were allegedly denied access and a puppy with giardia was sold, officers moved in for "failure to provide medical treatment," she says.

Most of the dogs had mange, ringworm or diarrhea; some had respiratory illness or uterine infections; many had multiple ailments. Worley estimates \$300,000 of state funds has been spent on the animals so far, most for medical treatment.

The dogs may be in the state's care for several months until the breeders' case is heard in court, or a judge may order them placed in shelters for adoption.

As for the dogs Best Friends took from Dogwood Kennels, adoptions will begin as soon as they're healthy.

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futureMrs. wrote: 19m ago
the best thing to do, when searching for a pet is to contact your local humane society. DO NOT give places like 'puppy world' or other pet chain stores any business! They are the people who are buying from the puppy mills! If you do choose to buy from an independent breeder, make sure they are registered with the AKC, and ALWAYS travel to the location where the puppies are being cared for. If you let them deliver to you, they could easily be one of the puppy mills that are falsely representing themselves online.
There are soo many animals in need of homes - purebred or not, they all need love.

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best wrote: 24m ago

There is one sure way to rid ourselves of 'puppy mills".. BUY FROM A BREEDER. The reason puppy mills exist? Puppy buyers want "instant gratification". They want what they want and they want it NOW. They cannot wait to research a breed, find out if it is the best one for them, find a good breeder and wait for the right puppy. Is it any wonder the "millers' produce thousands of puppies. THE PUBLIC DEMANDS IT. They want a birthday present for little Suzi or a Christmas present for little Joey. want to put the blame on "millers somewhere? Put it squarely on the back of John Q, Public and the American society that is geared to getting (and discarding) everything it wants NOW.

Buy from a breeder.. I cannot emphasize that point enough.. be willing to wait.. if even one fifth of the people who buy dogs and cats did this .. our shelters would be empty and isn't that what we want?

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Wookeeduck wrote: 1h 14m ago

The 98% (which I've seen varied between 94% to 98%) is not closed-minded, it's a statistic. As for dogs in pounds, they tend to end up there because of irresponsible owners. If a dog is born with aggressive tendencies, then that would be an example of bad breeding. I've spent a lot of time at the SPCA and have heard many reasons for dogs being left there and too many indicate a failure in the owner and not the dog. Proper training and housebreaking is a part of being a pet owner. If you are unable to take the time to do that, then expect a poorly behaved dog. Dogs have no idea what we want unless we show them. As for breeders, a good one does not sell his/her dogs to pet stores. A true breeder is trying to enhance the blood line of a particular dog breed and are very concerned about the homes the dogs are being adopted into. There is a big difference between a real breeder and someone who just produces puppies and throws ads into the newspaper to sell them. A real breeder is able to give a dog's bloodline and is an expert on their particular breed. A real breeder will have continued interest in the dog you buy. As to purebreds, if you intend to be a part of a dog show then by all means research and find a good breeder. If you're looking for a companion, why must you have a purebred? If has to be a purebred, are you aware of how many are left at pounds and the SPCA? Pure breeds are left there often, not just mutts. There are also rescue groups for each breed. The fact that there are so many rescue groups for so many different breeds is a strong indication that people are carelessly buying, being so fixated on having a pure bred dog. What's interesting is how many of these so-called pure-bred dogs aren't pure bred at all. It's very easy for a bad breeder to claim more dogs to a litter than they've actually had and use the additional paperwork for a different dog. Belonging to a kennel club does not guarantee that the breeder has a purebred dog. The fact that there are so many dogs in the SPCA and the pound should tell us that we are over-producing and creating a big problem.

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blueberr59 wrote: 1h 47m ago

Shelters can be a good thing for some animals. But the only problem with a lot of the older dogs there is they are there for a reason. Yes, there is the occasional one that people dropped off just because they couldn't take care of it any more. But the majority of DOGS in the pound are there because they bite, or bark, or have behavioral problems. It is almost impossible to find a puppy at a pound. There are other options as well. A lot of pet stores are carrying mixed breed puppies. If you are concerned about genetic issues with a pure bred pup, this is a way to go, and you get to raise and train the pup yourself.

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[penelopemb](#) wrote: 1h 54m ago

Part of the problem is the demand for "pure breed" pets ... dimwits like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears with their gaggle of chihuahuas don't help the trend. Now everyone thinks they need some kind of pure-bred dog, and these breeders are laughing all the way to the bank. People should start looking to the county animal shelter for dogs ... no, they often aren't pure breeds, but they make wonderful companions and they don't suffer from the genetic diseases that often befall such "pedigreed" pets.

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[blueberr59](#) wrote: 1h 56m ago

It is super close minded to say that 98% of puppies in a pet store come from puppy mills. I work at a pet store and ALL of our puppies come from licensed breeders. We know all of our breeders and our brokers. One of our brokers is a long time family friend of our owners. I understand that puppy mills do exist, and it is a terrible thing and makes me sick, but you can't say that ALL pet stores buy from them. It is like saying all Jewish people are cheap, or all African American people are gang bangers. It is stupid. We love every animal that comes into our store, and we would NEVER buy from a puppy mill.

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[Mix80](#) wrote: 2h 21m ago

Our laws for cruelty to animals must become stricter. People should be thrown in jail, without question. These puppy mills are a far cry from a "good business" .

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[HoneyPoo](#) wrote: 2h 57m ago

It's a shame to see what Ellen went through. At least she didn't hurt the dog. She gave him to a loving family. Look at all the poor animals. This is as bad as third world countries selling their young girls to raunchy old wealthy men for pleasure. It kills me to think that Americans think, American is home of the brave and land of the free. Dogs don't even get treated good her. For those of you who wish to purchase a dog, go to a shelter and give a dog a home rather than spend thousands of dollars on a dog that more than likely came from a puppy mill. And don't trust those that say we will ship you animal. Can you image the trauma those poor little helpless dogs endure for the pleasure of someone else's luxury. Unless you can see the parents of the dog don't buy it. Go to a shelter. Americans are sick people and they talk about other countries with such cynacism. As usual all hypocrits. That's what this countries motto should be, Land of the Free home of the HYPOCRITS.

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[sniffydogs](#) wrote: 3h 20m ago

I agree with 3beards. We have a local person that calls herself a "rescue" here in Michigan. She sells unvetted puppy mill puppies. The pups are loaded with congenital defects and problems. If you are thinking about a puppy INSIST on seeing the Mom and the breeder's facilities. Most reputable breeders are happy to show you because they are concerned where their pups are going to. Reputable breeders and rescues will also stand behind their dogs for life, not until the check clears. Puppies should NOT leave their Moms until at least 8 weeks. Otherwise they don't get the socialization from Mom and littermates and have lifelong problems.

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3beards wrote: 3h 41m ago

"Females that no longer produce large litters are "let loose in the fields," killed or starved to death or sold at auctions"

I currently have 3 puppy mill fosters. One was bought at Missouri auction just 1 year ago for \$25 or \$50 because she's 8 years old. Another was dumped at a mid-Michigan shelter. The third was turned over by a Missouri breeder who even though she didn't take care of him physically like the article mentions, had some sense of morality and turned him over to us. I know that the dogs we take in from commercial breeders have been through hell. I see it every time they flinch or shy away when all I want to do is give them comfort. For some of the dogs, trust in humans after their experiences in mills never comes. For others, like the 8 year old I have, it's taken a year. Rescue groups like ours, A New Start on Life, whose prime focus is the puppy mill dog need all the help we can get in rehabilitating these dogs and finding the homes that will understand what these dogs have gone through and give them the love and patience they deserve.

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