

Animal activists target big breeders and puppy mills

State and federal laws do not go far enough to protect animals, advocates say

By Lisa Black and Jeff Long, Tribune reporters

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Jennifer Cantoral paid \$1,200 for her dog, Ralphie, a miniature poodle, who has had a variety of health problems since his adoption. (March 3, 2010)

Carla Kibler said she wishes she had investigated before falling in love with Beefcake, an English bulldog puppy she bought from a Naperville pet store in December. Her 10-year-old triplets agreed to forgo their Christmas presents to get the dog, which cost more than \$2,000.

But Beefcake arrived at home with kennel cough, and three weeks later he died of pneumonia. Devastated, Kibler set out to learn more about her dog, joining a growing national movement to educate pet buyers about where their animals come from.

Kibler learned that "Beef" had come from a federally approved breeder in Missouri, a state notorious among animal advocates who target so-called puppy mills.

The pet store offered to replace the puppy, but emotionally spent, Kibler refused. "They said if it wasn't born with a defect they didn't want to give you a refund," said Kibler, who eventually got half her money back.

In Illinois and elsewhere, animal rights activists are growing more strident in their demands that pets be adopted from rescue centers or shelters rather than from retailers who buy dogs from large-scale breeders.

They want retailers to reveal more information about the breeders that produce the bouncing, irresistible puppies they offer for sale, believing that consumers will turn away from pups from big breeders. They use the negative term "puppy mill" to describe not only breeders who mistreat animals, but also those who run legal commercial businesses.

"A good quality breeder breeds the dogs in their homes," said Jordan Matyas, Illinois director for the Humane Society of the United States "When you are talking about someone who has 100 to 200 dogs, that is a massive endeavor and there is no way to socialize those dogs."

The critics also argue that federal standards are not tough enough. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the main enforcement agency, has not revoked or suspended any Illinois dog breeder's license in five years.

The Humane Society is pushing for a bill pending in the state legislature that would require pet stores to identify breeders who supply their cats and dogs. A companion bill would add more restrictions to licensed kennel operators and breeders.

Some commercial breeders say the activists are going too far.

"They are trying to stir the pot, trying to get uneducated individuals seeing everything their way," said Ryan Rauch, who keeps up to 200 dogs at his R 2 Farm in downstate Beecher City. He raises 10 different breeds of dogs in wire cages, saying it is the only way to keep them clean and healthy, before delivering them to stores such as Petland and Lambs Farm in Libertyville.

Rauch, 40, said he employs eight workers and contracts with a St. Louis veterinarian to care for his puppies. He houses the dogs in four prefabricated buildings off a private rural road, surrounded by farm fields dotted by oil pumps. On Thursday, he declined a request to tour or photograph his operation, where muffled barking could be heard.

Although he takes pride in his business, Rauch said he didn't want to be targeted by animal activists.

"I know there are some individuals out there that are very, very, very poor-quality breeders," he said. "I am a professional breeder. Our dogs are not kept like that."

The Department of Agriculture, which regulates wholesale breeders that sell to pet stores, does not limit the number of dogs kept by breeders and allows animals to be kept in wire cages, which advocates oppose. The state licenses pet retailers that sell directly to the public.

"Sometimes that term 'puppy mill' gets tossed about and winds up incorrectly covering the vast majority of these breeders," said Dave Sacks, a USDA spokesman based in Riverdale, Md. "Our folks just continue to hold all the breeders accountable to abiding by federal regulations."

Federal and state laws provide for minimum standards of care, prohibiting animal cruelty or suffering, but are difficult to enforce unless an animal is in imminent danger, experts say.

In Illinois, a state budget crisis and historically weak enforcement options also limit animal welfare investigations. Statewide, the Illinois Department of Agriculture employs six inspectors charged with overseeing more than 1,400 pet dealers, including 840 kennel operators and breeders, a spokesman said.

Since June 2008, the state has issued 342 citations for violations, including unsanitary conditions and failure to keep required records on the dogs' health.

"Obviously, we are in a budget crunch and do the best we can with what we are given," said Colleen O'Keefe, a licensed veterinarian and manager of the state Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Animal Protection division.

When the state has revoked licenses, some of the breeders moved and reopened elsewhere, she said.

In March, 2008, authorities removed 49 undernourished and filthy dogs from cages stacked atop each other in an unheated barn in Peotone.

"Some were in cages that were too short for them, and they could never stand up straight," said Susan Murawski of Worth, a former animal shelter volunteer who adopted one of the puppies. "The pans underneath the cages would overflow with

urine and feces that would fall to the cage below."

The owner was not a licensed breeder at the time, but applied for and received a license, despite the problems uncovered in the raid. The owner no longer holds a breeder's license, state officials said.

Other cases are not so clear cut.

Jennifer Cantoral said that an employee told her that the miniature poodle she bought for \$1,200 at a Naperville Petland store came from a local breeder. Later, Cantoral said, she discovered the dog, Ralphy, came from a USDA-licensed facility in Loogootee, Ind.

A veterinarian who contracts with Petland deemed the dog healthy during an exam within the first week, according to the store's co-owner, Mike Isaac.

Cantoral said the dog was diagnosed 45 days later with kennel cough, which turned into pneumonia. The animal continues to suffer health problems, possibly stemming from an immune disorder, and she blames the breeder and store.

"The pain my family has been through with this entire situation is immeasurable," Cantoral said. While Petland offered to refund her money, she has decided to keep the dog because her children were attached to it.

Isaac disputes that any employee told Cantoral that her puppy came from Naperville, saying that he personally visits the breeders who supply the store's dogs.

"We take a great deal of pride in monitoring our breeders," he said. "We do random checks. We call the veterinarians."

Although Illinois gets harsh reviews from some activists, the nonprofit Animal Legal Defense Fund in December ranked the state the best in the nation for animal protection laws. The Cotati, Calif.-based organization based its rankings on the "relative strength and comprehensiveness of laws," giving Illinois high marks for its felony penalties for cruelty and neglect, mandatory reporting by veterinarians and other measures.

Some cite room for improvement, saying past attempts to strengthen regulations have been opposed by large and small-scale breeders, veterinarians, pet stores, hunters and the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Steve Dale, a Chicago dog behavior consultant, said that he shares the activists' concerns but fears some proposed laws are over-reaching and will penalize good breeders. Dale, also a blogger for Chicago Tribune Media Group's ChicagoNow.com, said the public can more effectively wipe out irresponsible pet dealers by refusing to buy "designer dogs" in pet boutiques.

In January 2009, state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, proposed a law that would prevent breeders from having more than 20 unaltered dogs older than a year, and prohibiting anyone convicted of a felony under animal welfare laws from getting a license.

It also would have prohibited wire flooring and required consistent cleaning, as well as sufficient heating, cooling and ventilation. But the bill, which would have been among the nation's strongest, never got out of committee, Fritchey said.

Since then, two bills have been introduced that would require pet stores to disclose breeder information to buyers. Both are in committee and face opposition from the same groups that opposed Fritchey's bill.

"One would think that there would not be a lot of opposition to a bill requiring humane treatment of puppies," Fritchey said. "And one would be wrong."