

Bill banning gas chambers for animals sent to governor

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The Illinois General Assembly has voted to end gas chamber euthanasia for animals.

It has been more than a year since State Representative John Fritchey (D-Chicago) and the Chicago English Bulldog Rescue Group (CEBR) joined forces with animal advocates to introduce House Bill 4844.

The bill, which bans the use of carbon monoxide gas as a form of euthanasia for animals – now known as Senate Bill 0038 – passed both houses shortly before the close of the General Assembly's recent session and is now awaiting a signature by the governor.

Organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the American Society for the Prevention and Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) have supported the bill along with numerous animal organizations and rescue groups across the state including the local Hope Animal Rescues in Madison County which has been a strong advocate and supporter of the bill.

Co-Founders of Hope Animal Rescues Jackie Spiker and Kim Lee were pleased to hear the news on Monday.

Spiker and Lee said they have been lobbying for years to ban gas chambers in the state of Illinois.

The duo started a rescue after watching the devastation of Hurricane Katrina's impact the animals in New Orleans and has been active in saving animals facing death in animal control facilities, particularly those who use the gas chamber for euthanasia, such as the animal shelter in Mount Vernon.

Since its conception, the group has rescued nearly 800 pets from death. And through their involvement, they have learned about the tragic life of so many unwanted animals in the United States, such as those killed via the use of gas chambers and even the use of other archaic methods like using exhaust from a vehicle to kill animals.

In the past, the use of carbon monoxide gas or the gas chamber method has been used to execute prisoners.

In the early 1990s, the act was noted as “cruel and unusual punishment” and it ended in the United States as a form of execution. But the method has continued on in euthanizing animals.

More than a half a dozen states still use the method to kill animals, and until now Illinois allowed the process to continue.

According to the HSUS, 6 to 8 million cats and dogs enter shelters across the country each year, and of those 3 to 4 million are euthanized.

A majority are euthanized via an injection which is painless and quick. But again, many are euthanized via a gas chamber and begin a slow and painful death - it takes approximately 30 to 40 minutes for the pets to die.

The process along with the lack of regulations has called this method into question by animal advocates.

Shelters, breeders or other groups in the state of Illinois use this method to kill unwanted animals. Violations have included: inadequate gas chambers; gassing pets without a license; and gassing numerous pets both cats and dogs at the same time which is in violation of the current law.

All this is especially hard on those who have witnessed the act like local supporters Spiker and Lee.

Spiker said Hope Rescues has supported HB4844 since the beginning.

“In our mission to aide in the welfare of homeless pets, we feel strongly that education and spay/neuter programs are the only way to lower the pet population in this state and until we accomplish that there will still be a need for euthanasia,” Spiker said.

But she said the answer must be humane.

“Gas chambers for many years have been used to deal with our society's answer to pet overpopulation, euthanasia,” Spiker said. “Most of them are old and run down today which has been known to leave pets still alive and suffering after being gassed. Our country banned the use of gas on humans years ago because it was determined to be inhumane, yet we continued to use it on homeless pets. It was time that we ended this practice.”

Lee said Hope Rescues has relationships with many animal controls in our area and has seen what happens to the countless unwanted pets.

“We have seen first-hand the suffering of pets because of irresponsible owners,” Lee said. “We know many staff members of animal controls who are torn between what they must do and what they feel. Many people believe that the staff at animal controls are heartless uncaring people, but in fact they have one of the worst jobs on the planet and they have to do what they do because of our society's lack of responsibility. We are happy for the many of them that they no longer have to perform their job with such a barbaric tool.”

Spiker said the bill will not end the deaths, but just let those created by our society unnecessarily

die peacefully.

“Our society is one of gross waste, and unrestricted disposable items, including pets. None of this would be an issue if society were responsible with their pets,” Spiker said. “For every pet that dies in an animal control there is a person somewhere responsible for their death. All this bill accomplished is the way their lives will end. It unfortunately does not prevent the deaths.”

Illinois state director for HSUS Jordan Matyas was also happy to hear the measure had passed.

“The Illinois legislature has spoken clearly that in those unfortunate situations where an animal must be euthanized, they deserve that it be done humanely,” said Matyas. “The use of the gas chamber is less humane, more expensive, and more time consuming than the use of lethal injection. While we work towards the day when euthanasia of healthy animals is no longer necessary, we are grateful to state Representative John Fritchey and Senator Heather Steans for their commitment to this important issue.”

The Illinois State Veterinary Medical Association (ISVMA) was opposing the bill. But according to the HSUS, after much debate and negotiations, the final bill includes a provision that allows veterinarians to conditionally use the gas chamber with strict limitations.

Since the early 1800s, legislation has been introduced to prevent the cruel and improper treatment of animals. The well-known anti-slavery crusader and co-founder of the world’s oldest anti-cruelty society William Wilberforce was fighting for animals in the Parliament in England back then, and now many legislators and animal advocates are continuing the fight.

This week the state also took another momentous step by enacting a task force “Joint Task Force on Breeders and Pet Stores” (SJR 0056), sponsored by Fritchey and Sen. Daniel Kotowski (D-Mt. Prospect), that will help draft a new law to ensure that pet stores and puppy producers provide humane care for dogs.

The task force is to include members appointed by the House and Senate and the Department of Agriculture, dog breeders, pet store owners and several appointed members of the animal welfare community.

The HSUS said the task force will investigate and make recommendations on the most effective ways to strengthen laws to protect dogs from abuses in large-scale puppy mill operations, which are often sold through pet stores and the Internet. Issues that will be examined include: humane care standards at commercial breeding facilities and pet stores, accurate record keeping and protections for consumers.

Matyas said the HSUS is grateful to Fritchey and Kotowski.

“This task force provides hope for dogs that suffer in abusive puppy mills every day in our state,” Matyas said.

The HSUS is encouraging people to contact their elected officials and ask them to crack down on

abusive mass scale puppy mills. To learn more about the HSUS visit, www.hsus.org or Hope Animal Rescues, visit www.hoperescues.com.