

# Some pet stores getting out of the puppy business

## Humane Society seeks pledges in fight against 'backyard breeders'

By John Keilman  
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The Humane Society of the United States has long denounced the practice of selling [dogs](#) at pet stores, contending that it props up a mass-breeding industry that treats animals cruelly. But as the group seeks new laws to clamp down on the trade, it is also trying to prompt change with a few kind words.

The organization has given its endorsement to 45 [Chicago](#)-area pet stores that have taken a pledge not to carry puppies. The society hopes the seal of approval will funnel more customers to those retailers, rewarding them for steering clear of the breeding business.

"We want to encourage (the shops) by saying thank you, and to encourage people to support those stores," said Jordan Matyas, Illinois director for the Humane Society.

Those who run some of the shops say it's hard to tell whether the endorsement has made an economic difference. But they added that many shoppers have made it abundantly clear that they expect stores to stay out of the puppy trade.

"A lot of our clientele patronizes us because we don't sell puppies," said Chuck Hume, owner of Animal Feeds and Needs in [Arlington Heights](#). "We'd lose I don't how many customers if we decided to do that."

The Humane Society and other animal welfare groups have for years criticized "puppy mills," breeders that produce dogs on a large scale.

Even though many of these operations are licensed and inspected by the federal government, critics say the minimum standards of care, which allow animals to be kept in wire-floor cages and bred without limit, are so low they amount to cruel treatment.

"If the average dog owner saw the conditions that are allowed under (those) regulations, they would be horrified," said Stephanie Shain, senior director for the society's anti-puppy mills campaign. "They would not allow their own animals to live that way."

Some Downstate animal control officers say widespread unemployment appears to have produced a growing number of "backyard breeders," novices who hope to make money by selling puppies.

Those efforts frequently fail, the officers say, leading to animals being abandoned or

dropped off at the local pound.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture, which regulates some breeders, had no statistics reflecting the state of the industry here. But anecdotally, veterinarian Colleen O'Keefe, the department's division manager of food safety and animal protection, said the tough economy seems to have produced a slowdown.

She said one large dog auction in Arthur, a town east of Decatur, closed last year after slack demand pushed the price of a puppy to as low as \$10.

"A lot of the commercial breeders have really cut down, recognizing there isn't much of a market right now," she said.

The Humane Society would like to keep the pressure on big breeding operations, so it is pushing for new laws in [Missouri](#), a state it says supplies many Illinois pet shops.

The organization is gathering signatures for a ballot initiative that would cap the number of dogs a breeder can keep, as well as establish stricter requirements for the animals' care.

A similar proposal in Illinois last year went nowhere, and one of its sponsors, state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, said it was wrongly portrayed as an attempt to put all breeders out of business. A task force is working on a compromise measure, he said.

"Every session we don't take action on this issue is another year where countless animals are mistreated," he said.

But for all the attempts at changing laws and regulations, Shain said she hoped the low-key campaign of applauding puppy-free stores could prove effective in its own way. So far, she said, about 450 stores in 35 states have taken the pledge and received the group's support.

"I couldn't tell you how much (the endorsement) has helped, but I can tell you for sure that our clients appreciate that we don't sell puppies," said Joe Spitz, co-owner of the Wet Nose pet stores in [Oak Brook](#) and Geneva. "I'm sure we gain clients because of that."

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