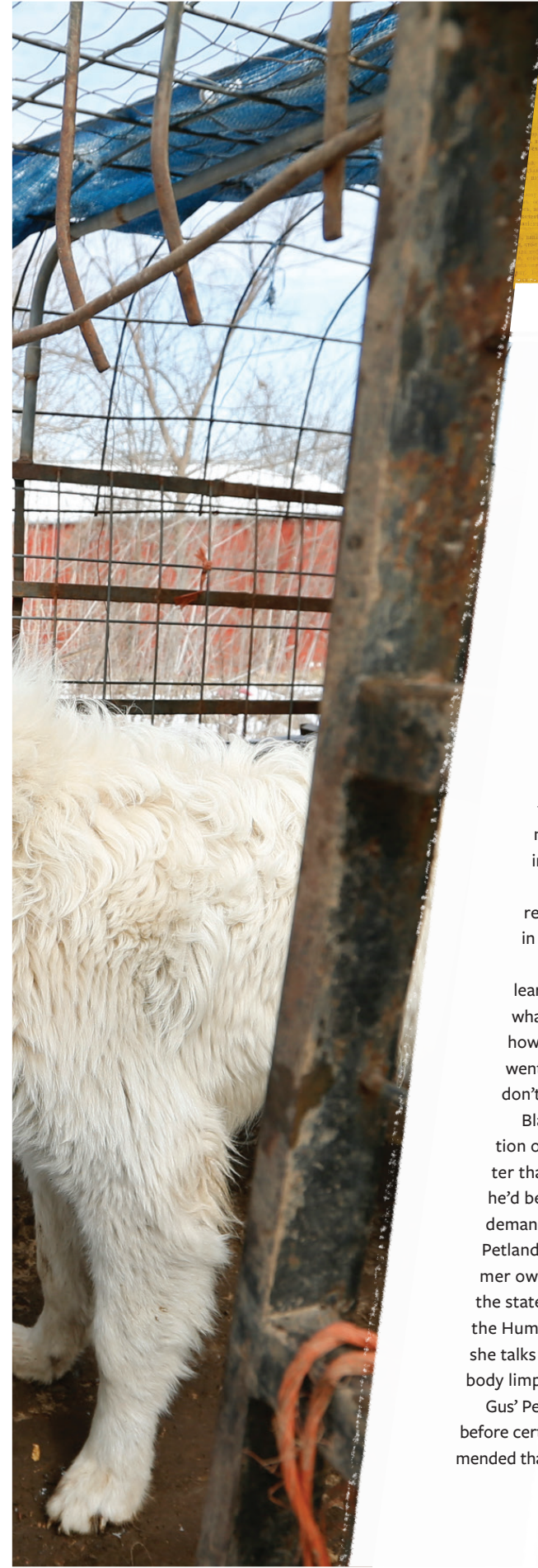


Hope in the heartland





Why we're fighting to protect dogs in the second most prolific puppy mill state—and beyond

By Bethany Wynn Adams

When Kym Black's granddaughter bought a 9-month-old Maltese-Yorkie mix named Gus, she thought she was getting an adorable bargain. "Morkie" puppies typically cost at least \$1,000 at a pet store, but a Facebook friend sold Gus for half that amount.

Within a week, Gus started having seizures. Black's granddaughter took him to the local veterinarian, who was surprised: He'd seen this dog before. Gus' original owner bought him at a Petland store in Rome, Georgia, and sold him when it became clear he was sick. His second owner brought him to the veterinarian—and then she also sold him, this time to Black's granddaughter.

Gus was prescribed medicine as a stopgap measure until Black's granddaughter could come up with the funds for a permanent fix. But when Black watched Gus while her granddaughter was out of town, she came home to find him suffering continuous seizures.

After calling another veterinarian, Black and her husband did the only thing they could think of to save him: They drove like bats out of hell to Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine, three hours away. Black thought Gus was going to die right there in the car. Instead, he was diagnosed with a liver shunt, a condition that prevents the liver from functioning as it should, and underwent emergency surgery.

Although he's healthier now, Gus has permanent brain damage from the repeated seizures. He isn't house-trained, and he has difficulty with stairs. All in all, Black and her husband spent \$3,000 on his care.

"That part doesn't matter to me because I know he's OK," says Black, who learned that the hereditary condition is passed from parents to puppies. "But what does matter is how many other litters does [the parent] dog have, and how many people went through what we went through, and their dog died, and they don't even know why?"

Black says this with the calm determination of a woman who told her granddaughter that Gus now needed special care, so he'd be staying at Grandma's for good; who demanded documentation about Gus from Petland, his former veterinarians and his former owners; who submitted her findings to the state attorney general, the local newspaper, the Better Business Bureau and the Humane Society of the United States. The only time her voice wavers is when she talks about how Gus seized and vomited all the way to Auburn University, his body limp as a dishrag.

Gus' Petland health form is cursory at best: "Weakness?" the veterinarian writes, before certifying him healthy and fit for sale. Yet that veterinarian told Black she recommended that the store euthanize Gus. "I'm sure they thought, '\$1,000? I'm not going to

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—KYM BLACK

euthanize \$1,000,” Black speculates. “They use them like little machines; they don’t care that something’s wrong with them.”

The health form does offer some clues into Gus’ past. It lists his birthday, Oct. 10, 2015—although bad breeders have been known to falsify birthdates so they can sell underage puppies—a breeder, David N. Miller of Millersburg, Ohio, and a distributor, the USDA-licensed Quail Creek Kennels. This distributor, also known as a broker, buys up puppies—primarily from breeders in Ohio—and sells them to pet stores in other states. (The distributor now operates under a different name.)

Black surmises that by the time Gus reached her in July 2016, his malnourished, 6-pound, 6-ounce body had been

bought and sold multiple times and shuttled across three states: from a breeder in Ohio, to a distributor in Ohio, to a pet store in Georgia, to an owner in Georgia, to two separate owners in Alabama. This is much the way a household object—a television, for example—makes its way from a factory, to a distributor, to an electronics store, to a buyer, to a second-hand buyer.

Yet Gus’ early life isn’t unusual, which is why the Humane Society of the United States is fighting to protect dogs like him in Ohio and beyond.

Financial disclosure statements show that the owner of Quail Creek Kennels purchased 12,000 dogs and made \$500,000 in 2012. And in January, an antibiotic-resistant outbreak of *Campylobacter* infection

sickened 113 people who had contact with puppies sold through Petland stores in several states—incidentally, the same pet store chain where Gus was purchased. Twenty-three people required hospitalization. The CDC hypothesized that puppies became infected “at various points along the distribution chain when they had contact with infected puppies from other breeders or distributors.”

Mass purchases, distributors and distribution chains aren’t what most people associate with their puppy’s origins. But for hundreds of thousands of puppy mill puppies each year, it’s how they begin their often too-short lives—and emblematic of how little bad breeders care for their moneymakers, from conception to death.

Ending cage stacking

Proposed changes in Ohio would prohibit cage stacking, a practice that allows excrement to drop from higher cages onto the dogs below.





"It's easy to sell puppies. The only hard part is clouding over the origins of the puppies and making it all seem OK."

—HSUS UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATOR

A cultural disconnect

"There is not a more emotional purchase than a puppy," says an undercover investigator for the Humane Society of the United States. She says a puppy distributor based in Ohio once told her he used to sell cars, but puppies sell themselves—no haggling required. "It's easy to sell puppies," she says. "The only hard part is clouding over the origins of the puppies and making it all seem OK."

People who buy puppy mill dogs often don't know that they're buying puppy mill dogs, who come from inhumane breeding operations where "animals are neglected to save costs," says John Goodwin, senior director of the Humane Society of the United States' Stop Puppy Mills campaign. Many puppy mills sell and ship dogs to brokers, who might sell and ship puppies directly to online shoppers, or to pet stores, or to smaller retailers, who might

sell them online, at flea markets or from their cars or homes, claiming to be small family breeders or to source dogs from trusted local hobbyists.

When it comes to commercial dog breeders, "you couldn't design it better if you tried. It's designed to basically get the customer as far away from the truth of where their dog came from as possible," says Rory Kress, journalist and author of *The Doggie in the Window*. Curious about the origins of her own pet store dog, Izzie, Kress spent a year digging up documentation and interviewing animal welfare experts, USDA and other government employees, veterinarians, breeders, buyers and other experts as research for her book.

When she eventually tracked down Izzie's breeder in Missouri, she says the reality was wildly different than the backstory constructed for her in the pet store. She went home and asked Izzie: "Who are you?"

Once you've selected your dog at a clean, bright pet store, she quickly becomes a member of your family and even a piece of your identity, explains Kress, who interviewed a psychologist to find out what happens when humans—even humans who know about puppy mills—see a puppy in a pet store. (Unsurprisingly, we lose all common sense.)

It's very hard to face the reality that your furry family member started out in a puppy mill, so many people prefer to remain blissfully ignorant about their dog's true origins, much like how many people place a mental wall between their foil-wrapped cheeseburger and the factory farm it came from. Many owners only begin to ask questions when their dog suddenly, heartbreakingly, gets sick.

In a society that places such high emotional value on canine companions, it is shocking that the puppy industry makes millions at the expense of both parent dogs—who might live their entire lives in cages before being killed—and the puppies themselves. Frequently inbred—and therefore susceptible to hereditary diseases—puppies are shipped across the country before their immune systems are fully developed.

Yet the only protection the federal government offers the dogs who supply many of our nation's pets is the Animal Welfare Act, which was signed into law in 1966.

Do you know where your dog is from?

"Small family operation" or "USDA-certified" labels don't mean "humane." Here's how the puppy mill industry hides the truth about your dog's origins.



1. Puppy mill: cruel, high-volume breeding operation



2. Broker: middleman who might work with multiple puppy mills and retail outlets



3. Retail outlet: pet store or other retailer selling in person and/or online, or a retailer posing as "breeder"



4. Buyer: misled consumer whose money allows the cycle to continue

As the sole federal law protecting animals sold in commerce, which includes breeder dogs and puppies, “it’s better than nothing,” says Goodwin, but “it needs to be upgraded significantly, because commercial dog breeding facilities can keep dogs in conditions anyone else would consider animal cruelty. It needs to be upgraded so that the standards are consistent with what the American public expects.”

The law says nothing about preventing genetic illnesses like Gus’ liver shunt, but requires breeders with more than four female breeding dogs who sell to pet stores, brokers or research facilities—or those who sell online sight-unseen—to uphold bare minimum standards of care. Few state laws mandate standards of care that are any better, and only about 18 states conduct breeder inspections.

USDA inspectors repeatedly find breeders in violation of the act’s minimal standards, but very rarely revoke a breeder’s license: The HSUS confirmed that while the USDA revoked just nine licenses in 2016, inspectors failed to revoke even a single license over the past year. “This is an indication that things are getting worse,” says Kathleen Summers, HSUS director of puppy mills outreach and research.

And even some breeders who pass inspections every year are unquestionably



operating puppy mills. “Under the USDA regulations, a puppy mill can keep a dog in a cage only six inches longer than her body, with her paws never touching grass, for her entire life, and that is entirely legal,” says Goodwin.

Kress also found that USDA inspectors may choose to treat violations as off-the-record teachable moments, rather than recording them as violations. And through the government’s own documentation, she discovered that a state inspector and a federal inspector visiting the same facility, on the same day, might “paint a completely different picture of the same operation.”

To give the public a more complete view of what’s happening, the HSUS puppy

mills team combs through state and USDA inspection reports, as well as puppy buyer complaints submitted to the HSUS, each year. In 2018, 13 puppy mills in Ohio made the HSUS Horrible Hundred list, an annual detailing of puppy mills nationwide with egregious violations. (Gus’ distributor, Quail Creek Kennels, made the Horrible Hundred in 2016.)

Yet it’s still an incomplete picture, because the USDA only inspects around 2,600 of an estimated 10,000 puppy mills in the U.S. annually, and only a fraction of puppy buyers submits complaints. And in February 2017, the USDA removed even these imperfect records from its site, kneecapping efforts to track bad breeders and making it impossible to enforce the few state and city laws that ban the sale of dogs from breeders with severe Animal Welfare Act violations.

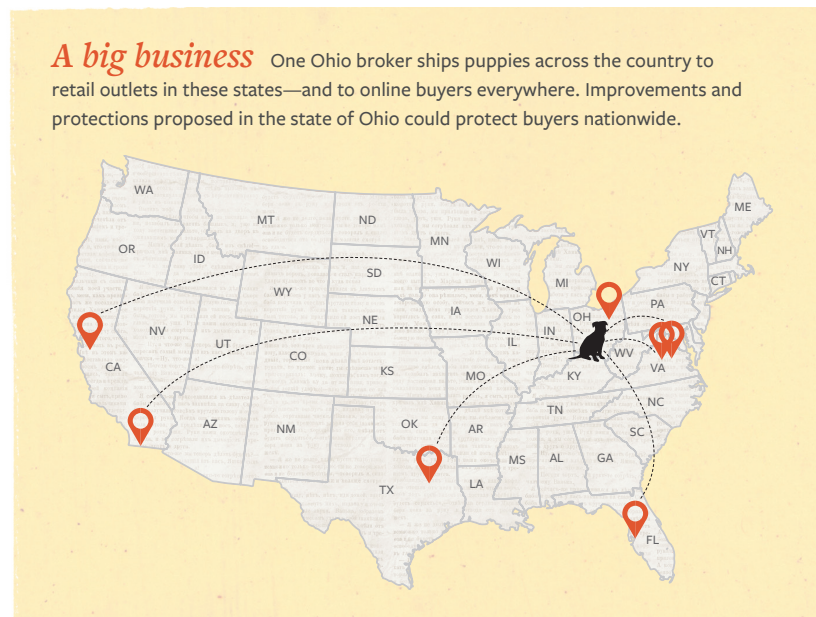
The USDA has since restored some reports, although most are heavily redacted: Violations are listed without breeder names, kennel names or license numbers. What the available reports and buyer complaints do reveal is that within the boundaries of the Animal Welfare Act, hundreds of kennels legally breed, raise and sell dogs in ways that most would call animal cruelty—and a large percentage of those kennels operate in Ohio.

A sampling of what USDA inspectors found in Ohio last year—at licensed facilities—includes moldy food and filthy water; rusted and feces-crusting outdoor shelters outfitted with painful wire flooring and teeming with flies; and severe, painful medical issues.

“Unfortunately, our state doesn’t see commercial dog breeding as a problem, but as a business,” says Corey Roscoe, Ohio state director for the Humane Society of the United States.

Getting out the vote

In 2010, the Humane Society of the United States joined with other animal welfare groups in Missouri to fight for the Canine Cruelty Prevention Act—and were disappointed when the state legislature watered down the law after it passed. Although the law wasn’t as strong as the



coalition hoped, the statutory initiative still managed to drive around 2,200 puppy mills out of business.

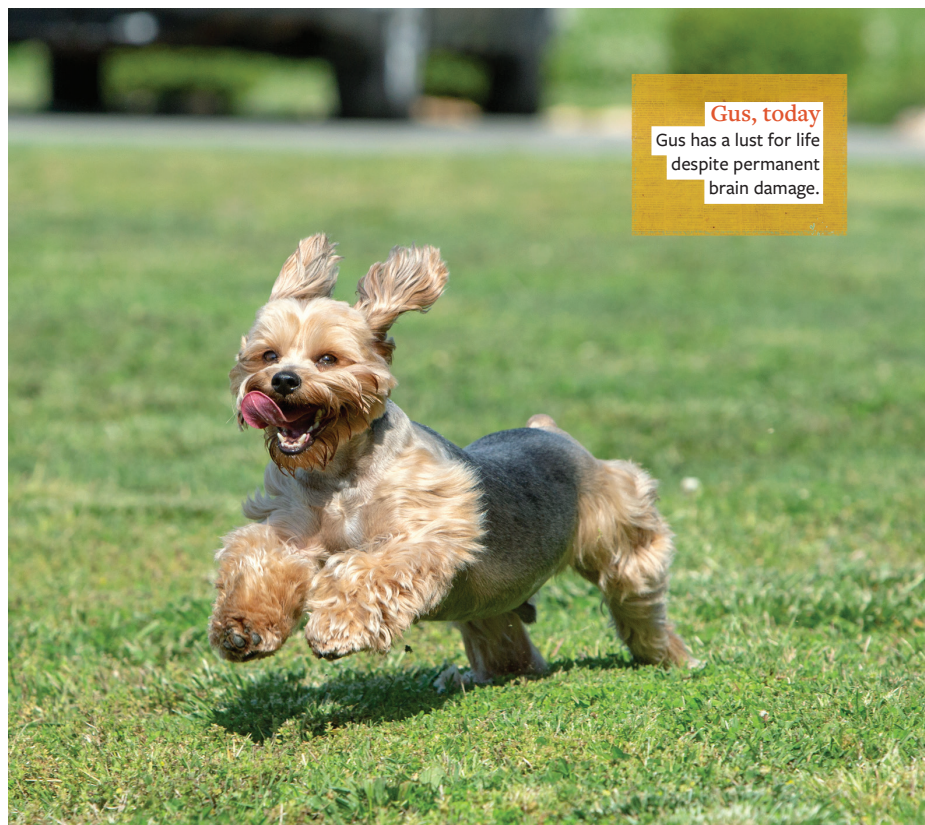
This year, the Humane Society of the United States hopes to expand on a law similar to Missouri's Canine Cruelty Prevention Act—Ohio's Commercial Dog Breeders Act, passed in 2012—by getting a proposed Ohio Puppy Mill Prevention Amendment on the ballot and up for a public vote. That's because in Ohio, one of the 24 states that allow ballot initiatives, a bill can go through the state legislature, where the Ohio General Assembly can vote it into statutory law—or voters can gather signatures to get a bill on the ballot, and the public can vote it into constitutional law.

The Humane Society of the United States initially chose to work toward a public vote because it can be tough to pass animal care regulations in states where agriculture is a mainstay of the economy, says Roscoe. Some in the agricultural community fight hard against what they fear is a slippery slope: First it will be dogs, then it will be farm animals.

But polls show 77 percent of Ohioans support stronger regulations for dog breeders. And as of late May, 3,000 volunteers were on the ground collecting signatures to get a law targeting puppy mills on the state's ballot and up for a vote in November.

Now, as the signature-gathering period draws to a close, state legislators are considering passing a bill much like the proposed Ohio Puppy Mill Prevention Amendment. "Volunteers' signature-gathering efforts are the only reason we're in a position to be able to do this," says Goodwin. Fearing a public vote, which would bypass the General Assembly entirely, state legislators are now willing to negotiate with Goodwin and other animal welfare leaders and pass a statutory law.

Ohio's existing law requires the licensing and inspection of breeders who produce nine litters of puppies and sell at least 60 dogs in a single calendar year. The new law would build on that framework, requiring the licensing and inspection of all breeders who have six or more breeding female dogs as well as 40 puppies at



any one time; five or more puppies sold through pet stores or brokers; or 40 or more sold through other outlets, annually. There are currently around 300 licensed, high-volume breeders in the state, but Roscoe suspects the real number of commercial breeders is closer to three times that amount.

The law would also strengthen the standards of care for dogs in breeding facilities, abolishing painful wire flooring and prohibiting cage stacking. It would also require protection from extreme weather conditions, larger enclosures, nutritious food provided at least twice a day, prompt treatment of any illness by a licensed veterinarian and other clear, commonsense standards.

Additionally, the law would ban commercial breeders in other states from selling puppies in Ohio unless their facilities meet those same standards, laying a foundation for reform outside of the state. Finally, it would require yearly veterinary examinations for parent dogs, potentially exposing diseases and congenital defects before they're passed to future litters of puppies.

The state has historically been rife with

inhumane dog breeders. But "if we can improve these standards of care for dogs in Ohio, what a great statement that is to have implications that are far reaching beyond Ohio," says Chris Niehoff, an HSUS district leader volunteer who's lived in Ohio all his life. "If you think about the ability to start a chain reaction, Ohio wouldn't be a bad place for that to start."

"Ohioans are the ones who are the boots on the ground doing the work, standing for two hours in the cold getting signatures, because they want their state to be more humane," says Roscoe. Ohioans took it on themselves, she says, to drive puppy mills out of business.

→ LEARN MORE:

At press time, the Ohio legislature was considering a bill that would vastly improve standards of care for dogs in the state's breeding facilities. Go to humanesociety.org/allanimals to find out what happened or see the next issue of *All Animals*.