



Pet shop horror: Outrage as pooch peddlers foist sick animals on public

By **Thomas Caywood**
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Profit-hungry puppy peddlers are taking advantage of lax state oversight to warehouse animals in inhumane conditions and foist sick dogs on unsuspecting families.

A Herald review of thousands of documents and interviews with former pet store workers and anguished customers exposed shocking cases of pooches caged in filth, treated superficially by store veterinarians and sold so ill they perished in their new owners' arms.

"I've had dogs die in my lap so many times," said former pet store staffer Paul Brennan of Plymouth. "We just put them in the freezer. It was disgusting."

Brennan, 24, is one of hundreds of people over the past three years who complained to state officials about problem pet stores. Their concerns rarely led to fines or license suspensions.

Instead, outfits such as the mall-based Debby's Petland chain - which logged 60 formal customer complaints and nearly 90 violations of state animal health rules in three years - were allowed to continue trafficking in the ailing animals. Many pups fetch between \$1,000 and \$1,500 and are in high demand this time of year.

The Herald investigation covered more than 80 pet shops in Eastern Massachusetts, the vast majority of which had few formal complaints or violations.

'It died in my arms'

Brennan said he saw a number of dogs die during the four years he worked on and off at the Independence Mall Debby's in Kingston. One stands out - a bulldog pup with an obstructed bowel whose stomach swelled grotesquely.

"I watched it literally turn into a basketball where its back or front legs wouldn't touch the ground. It died in my arms," he said.

Brennan also alleges Debby's violated state rules requiring that newly arrived dogs be quarantined for 48 hours to ensure they're healthy enough for sale. He quit in 2002 and blew the whistle on "deplorable conditions" in a lengthy letter to state regulators.

But the Bureau of Animal Health, which is tasked with inspecting pet stores, never contacted him, he said.

That's no surprise to animal activists such as Leigh Grady of Sterling, who runs a shelter and the "Boycott Pet Stores" campaign.

"It's a total joke. They don't do anything," Grady said of the BAH.

Sara Purcell, 19, a former saleswoman at the Woof & Co. pet store in Braintree's South Shore Plaza, said the state checks often had a perfunctory feel to them.

"I think they overlooked a lot of things," she said.

Asked if the bureau comes down hard enough on violators, MSPCA Vice President for Animal Protection Carter Luke said, "We don't believe that they do."

The BAH, an arm of the state Department of Agricultural Resources, fields just three inspectors to monitor 173 licensed pet stores in Massachusetts.

"We feel we're doing everything we can under the law," Agricultural Resources Commissioner Douglas Gillespie said. "You have to be able to document a strong case before you can shut down a business in the commonwealth."

The department suspended two pet shop licenses and issued three small fines in the past year.

Warehousing puppies

Although a dozen or so stores had multiple infractions, a mountain of complaints and violations has accumulated over the past three years against the Debby's and Pet Club operations - two small chains totaling seven Massachusetts pet shops, all owned by New England Pet Centers Inc.

The company's headquarters in West Roxbury receives hundreds of puppies weekly from Midwestern breeding centers that activists dub "puppy mills." The headquarters, which houses a vast Pet Club store, and a satellite shop at the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers racked up 53 complaints and 77 violations, BAH records show.

In May 2002, Hub animal cops demanded to view the company's packed puppy warehouse on the VFW Parkway. After workers kept them waiting for 15 minutes, the cops reported the pups were sopping wet "as if they were just hosed down with water." Dogs were found stored by threes in cages about the size of a TV set.

A year later, a state inspection found 144 warehoused Pet Club puppies all suffering from upper respiratory infections at the same time. New England Pet Center officials did not respond to numerous phone calls seeking comment.

PHOTO GALLERY



Dogs await sale at Pet Club.
(Staff photo by Mark Garfinkel)

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A local vet who has treated sick Pet Club and Debby's puppies, including one that had to be hospitalized for a month with pneumonia, called the warehouse setup a "major problem."

"You have a lot of puppies coming in from all over the country together in this warehouse infecting each other," said the vet, who requested anonymity.

As recently as April, an Australian cattle dog from Pet Club got pneumonia within days of sale, costing its new owners more than \$1,500 in vet bills.

Despite scores of similar complaints against Pet Club and Debby's, the operation hasn't faced serious BAH discipline.

"It's almost as if anybody who makes a complaint, they consider you a lunatic. They support the license holders more than citizens," grumbled Brian Dumont of Shirley, who shelled out \$3,000 to treat a Chihuahua he bought from a pet store in Leominster.

Gillespie defended his BAH staff as overworked and hamstrung by outdated regulations, which lawmakers are moving to strengthen. The department hopes to shame scofflaw stores into cleaning up by posting inspection reports online.

Outbreak at new chain

The relatively new mall chain Woof & Co. has piled up 19 complaints and 27 violations in less than two years at its stores in the Square One Mall in Saugus and South Shore Plaza in Braintree.

An outbreak of the contagious intestinal parasite giardia at the Braintree store in May prompted town health officials to intervene. Former staffer Purcell said she often saw sick dogs sold.

"If it wasn't completely obvious they are sick, they'd stay on the sales floor," Purcell said. "They'd be sneezing and coughing with running noses or diarrhea out on the sales floor. That happened a lot."

A former manager of the Saugus store, Laurie Reggiannini, said she was fired for pushing reforms and for refusing to move a grievously ill dog that the store had on retainer from an animal hospital to the vet.

"They don't care about puppies," she said of the New Jersey-based chain. "They care about profit."

Woof & Co. Executive Vice President Judith Bethelmy bristled at the criticisms, denying that the chain ever knowingly sold sick puppies. Such allegations are "totally unfounded," she said.

"Any issues we might have had at one time with the state, we are now in accordance with the state and are enjoying a very good partnership," she said.

Missy's Puppyland in Stoughton, a stand-alone store specializing in pricey poodle mixes, has been cited by inspectors for a whopping 94 violations since June 2002.

In August, a joint inspection by the BAH and MSPCA found a dozen violations. The inspectors reported "extremely unsanitary" conditions and noted that two dogs in isolation didn't have enough head room to sit up.

Some dogs had no access to food and water, according to the report, and one boxer pup in the garage was so sick it had to be taken away for immediate treatment. Store manager Mark Zimmerman denied to inspectors that Missy's was housing more than 50 dogs in an upstairs office and adjacent garage - until their barking revealed the ruse - according to the report.

In an interview last week, Zimmerman said the boxer pup was fine and was later returned to the store. He dismissed the huge tally of violations as nitpicking.

"They were looking for anything, whether it was a piece of dust or a hair on a cage. They were picking on us," he said, later adding, "Missy's Puppyland is a very reputable, up-and-up pet store."

(Tom Mashberg contributed to this report.)

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