

Puppy mill closures: the economic impact on a local community

When a substandard breeding facility—i.e., a puppy mill—is closed and large numbers of dogs removed, this humane action can drain the financial resources of a local community, local animal welfare entities and large humane organizations. Yet a small town rarely derives any benefit from a puppy mill’s existence. Substandard large breeding facilities employ few staff and often don’t pay required taxes or license fees and generate animal waste; they also cause unpleasant odors, pollutants and noise. After authorities discover a major puppy mill enterprise, they can ignore it or deal with it. But some communities don’t have the necessary resources to handle the situation. Instead, prevention is key: Communities should discourage large-scale breeding facilities from opening in the first place.

One law enforcement official was brutally honest. He told an HSUS cruelty investigator, “If an event involving more than 100 dogs occurs, we will just ignore it because we simply don’t have the resources to handle the problem.” But ignoring a problem doesn’t make it go away; it perpetuates the suffering and allows additional breeding facilities to be created. A puppy mill with 100 dogs, if unchecked and unmonitored, often continues to grow until it houses 300, 500 or in some cases even more than 1,000 dogs. At that point, authorities can no longer ignore its effects on the community.



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Properly monitoring large-scale dog breeding facilities—including working with breeders to correct any problems with animal husbandry practices before substandard conditions become out of control—can prevent the need for large-scale seizures and huge financial costs to the humane societies, police and municipal governments that must rescue the dogs from squalid conditions.

Community impact examples of puppy mill closures

▪ Cabarrus County, North Carolina

When 141 dogs were removed from a puppy mill in North Carolina in September 2016, the Humane Society of the United States deployed its Animal Rescue Team to assist. The costs to the HSUS alone were **more than \$83,400, averaging more than \$591 per dog removed.** These costs included \$30,167 for **veterinary services**, as well as the cost of sending staff to the site to assist with handling and caring for the animals and the cost of sheltering and housing both staff and animals. Had the HSUS not stepped in to assist, local agencies, municipal shelters and smaller nonprofits would have had to cover most of the costs.

▪ Elkins, Arkansas

When 295 dogs were removed from a puppy mill in Madison County in March 2016, the costs to the HSUS alone were more than **\$91,600, or more than \$310 per animal.** These costs included sending staff to the site to assist with handling and caring for the animals; veterinary care; and food, shelter and housing for both staff and animals. National nonprofits are not always immediately available to assist—or may not be called in by local law enforcement—leaving local agencies and shelters to foot the bill.



- **North Dakota**

When 170 dogs were rescued from a puppy mill near Fargo in July 2013, the **bill for their veterinary care and boarding alone exceeded \$114,900, as Sergeant Tara Morris of the Cass County Sheriff's Office** told local news media. That amounted to about \$675 for each dog's medical care—not including the cost of the rescue itself, the cost of deploying law enforcement equipment and personnel, or expenses related to the judicial proceedings. The Casselton Veterinary Clinic reportedly took a large percentage off the retail bill, resulting in much lower costs to the agency, and the remainder was paid by public donations thanks to widespread local media coverage that followed the rescue. However, had the media outreach not been so successful, local agencies would have had to foot the bill.

- **Montana**

In October 2011, the HSUS assisted local authorities in the rescue of 161 Malamutes from a Montana AKC breeder due to animal cruelty. Because many pregnant females were seized, the number of animals needing care quickly exceeded 200. The jury trial was lengthy and the owner was not convicted of the 91 cruelty charges until October 2012. During the yearlong trial, a local animal care agency cared for the 200 dogs, and the HSUS reimbursed the agency for the dogs' expenses. The HSUS's initial outlay for equipment and deployment costs was about \$81,000, but after reimbursing the local animal care agencies for the care and feeding of the dogs, the HSUS's **expenses totaled almost \$500,000**. Had the HSUS not been able to assist, these costs would have been shouldered by the local agencies.

- **Vermont Puppy Mill, July 2011**

In July 2011, the HSUS facilitated the removal, emergency sheltering and initial veterinary care for 58 Labradors removed from a puppy mill in Vermont after the operator was charged with animal cruelty. The cost to the HSUS of deploying the Animal Rescue Team, purchasing animal care supplies, transporting animals, traveling and supplying equipment to assist in the removal and initial treatment of the animals was \$52,675, or almost \$1,000 per animal. This total does not include the salaries of law enforcement and security staff deployed to the scene, the cost of the legal proceedings, or the first 30 days of supervised, climate-controlled shelter, which was donated by a local horse farm and partially staffed by unpaid volunteers. The value of sheltering the animals at \$10 per animal, per day would have added \$17,400 to the costs, for a total of **\$70,075, or more than \$1,200 per animal**. Extensive follow-up medical expenses for the animals—including some who required amputations and tumor removals—are not included in this estimate.

- **Washington State**

The HSUS facilitated the June 2009 removal, emergency sheltering and initial veterinary care for 371 dogs from a puppy mill in Washington state after the owner was charged with animal cruelty for harboring sick animals in dilapidated housing. Private citizens reportedly donated approximately \$12,000 to the local sheriff's department to help care for the dogs. However, law enforcement authorities reported that the estimated cost of the operation was approximately **\$330,000**, which included the services from local veterinarians and clinics for the first 30 days of animal care. Most of the services, however, were provided to the county at no charge by the Humane Society of the United States.

Shelters and rescue groups incur expenses long after a closure

In addition to the costs to local taxpayers, courts and municipalities, nonprofit rescue organizations often incur high costs when assisting in puppy mill rescues. For example:

- When 69 dogs were seized from an Elmwood, Wisconsin, puppy mill in July 2016, the Pierce County court estimated that **the cost of caring for the dogs during the legal proceedings totaled approximately \$90,000. The court estimated that it would cost an additional \$20 per dog, per day for every animal** until each dog was released for adoption or euthanized.
- When the Central Nebraska Humane Society took in 31 dogs from a puppy mill closure in January 2016, they estimated they would have **to spend \$200 to \$250 per dog** to get each animal medically ready for adoption, in addition to feeding and sheltering them. Their adoption fee for each dog was \$120, leaving about half of the shelter's expenses uncovered.
- A spokesperson for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office reported in September 2015 that it would cost various shelters approximately **\$100,000 to temporarily house 183 animals** removed from an Alabama puppy mill.
- In January 2011, a Houston-area shelter spent more than **\$79,000 to treat, house and care for 241 dogs** rescued from a property where dogs were both hoarded and bred. This total included medical care (such as vaccinations, worming and postnatal care), veterinary boarding and transportation. (The HSUS reimbursed these expenses.)

Other costs of closing a facility

The costs of closing a puppy mill include more than just the removal and treatment of the animals. Extensive staff time—including law enforcement staff time—is needed to investigate a facility and document the problems. Dealing with 300, 500 or even 1,000 dogs is a massive and expensive undertaking. Specially equipped trucks, cages, food, water, medical supplies, cleaning supplies, bowls, hazmat gear, waste disposal essentials and other supplies must be brought to the site. And then there are the people who make it all happen: Professional dog handlers, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, animal experts and volunteers.



PHOTO BY MEREDITH LEE/THE HSUS

A separate facility (e.g., warehouse or fairgrounds) is usually needed to place the animals once they're removed from the breeding facility, which incurs costs for utilities, rent and insurance. Animals are usually transported in trucks—incurring high fuel and equipment bills—because no single local animal shelter can meet the immediate needs of such a large number of animals. In addition, food and lodging may be needed for the many essential volunteers and experts on site.

When authorities remove dogs and puppies, each animal is potential evidence and must be carefully documented, photographed and examined for medical problems. Each animal receives necessary vaccinations, grooming and flea/tick medication, and in some cases is placed in a shelter or foster family. If the animals are made available for adoption, then the intake shelter incurs the expense (staff, vehicle use, fuel costs) of transporting the dogs—plus the cost of caring for the dogs and sterilizing them before they're adopted into a loving family.

When there is a possibility of criminal charges being filed, expenses increase substantially as more time and documentation is required. Yet if criminal charges are not filed, chances are high the breeder will immediately go back into business with similar results. *If an owner chooses not to relinquish ownership of the animals and if no bonding provisions exists, the local community can be forced to house and care for the animals for months or more than a year pending court action.* The costs associated with such a large undertaking can be staggering and could be larger than the entire local government budget.



Why so expensive?

Caring for a large number of dogs is always a financial commitment, but these figures are staggering. Why does it cost so much to close down a substandard breeding facility?

- **Transportation:** The animals are living in horrible conditions and must be removed immediately. The humane transportation to a temporary shelter—and then to shelters throughout the country—requires large trucks specially equipped with proper heating, cooling and venting as well as sturdy and appropriate cages. And of course, fuel costs quickly add up.
- **Medical care:** Veterinarians, vet techs, examination rooms, equipment, drugs and medical supplies are expensive—even when many services and supplies are donated. If the dogs are to be placed out of state, each animal must travel with a proof of rabies vaccination and an individual health certificate signed by a licensed vet.
- **Manpower:** Because the dogs are so stressed by this process (many have never left their cages before nor been exposed to more than two or three people), expert animal handlers must be present.
 - A sufficient number of trained volunteers must be housed in local hotels and provided with food and drink.
 - For puppy mills with more than 100 dogs, at least 50 people per day may be required (veterinarians, expert animal handlers, vet techs, disaster specialists and volunteers) to handle the animals and perform all associated work.
 - People must be on hand to provide security; crime scene documentation; animal transfer and transport; photography and transcription for evidence purposes; medical exams and documentation of criminal violations; daily care (feeding, cage cleaning several times per day); supplies acquisition and management; grooming; and more.
 - Some cases may also involve health department personnel (due to the extreme unsanitary conditions found at most puppy mills), mental health personnel and representatives from child protective agencies.
- **Supplies:** Necessary supplies include trucks, fuel, vehicle insurance, cages, leashes, toys, cage liner pads, bowls, food, water, electricity, office supplies for keeping records on and near each animal, animal handling gear, protective clothing, communications equipment, cameras, grooming supplies, provisions for staff (such as meals and first-aid supplies), sanitation equipment and human and animal medications.
- **Building:** One large building is usually required to house the animals pending the legal hearing and custody decision. It serves as a staging area to physically examine, properly and legally document, and prepare the animals for transfer to appropriate shelters and approved rescue groups throughout the country. The building requires ventilation, heating or cooling capabilities, health and environmental considerations, proper zoning considerations, an office area with connectivity, electricity, parking spots and bathroom facilities

