Investigation: Many Maryland Pet Stores Found in Violation of Puppy Mill Disclosure Law

An undercover investigation by The Humane Society of the United States and ReLove Animals, Inc., found most of the pet stores in Maryland that sell puppies are apparently not fully complying with a law designed to provide shoppers with information about the origin of their puppies. In September 2013, investigators visited 12 puppy-selling pet stores in Maryland. Specifically, investigators checked to see if the stores were fulfilling the requirement that they “post conspicuously on each dog’s cage” the “state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” and “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.” This information is important because it could be used by a consumer to find out if the puppy they are considering purchasing may have come from a dealer (otherwise known as a broker) or breeder with a problematic animal welfare history. The law (Md. Code, Bus. Reg. §§ 19-701 to 707) went into effect one year ago.

Investigators found that most of the stores (nine out of twelve) were not posting all of the required information. Three stores were found largely complying with the disclosure law. While useful for consumers, this does not ensure that dogs are from humane sources. Evidence demonstrates that most dogs currently sold in pet stores come from large-scale commercial puppy mills, including stores that provide proper disclosure. But the law gives consumers more information to help them do their research and make more informed purchasing decisions.

In the nine stores that did not post the required information, when investigators asked for details about the breeder, the store employee either refused, or investigators found that the puppies
had been shipped from distant states, often by “brokers.” These middleman dealers often purchase large quantities of puppies from puppy mills and re-sell them to pet stores.

Puppy mills are large commercial breeding operations that turn a profit by cutting corners on animal care. They typically keep breeding dogs in small wire cages for their entire lives, with little or no personal attention, veterinary care, or exercise. By crowding many breeding dogs into small banks of cages, puppy mills are able to produce large numbers of puppies to satisfy the demands of pet stores. But due to the poor conditions in which they were raised, puppies from puppy mills are often sick. Research and undercover investigations by animal welfare groups have shown repeatedly that the vast majority of puppies currently sold in pet stores come from puppy mills.

In September and October 2012, illume Communications conducted six focus groups in three cities to understand how puppy buyers feel about puppy mills. They found that many people who had purchased their dogs in pet stores were “seemingly unaware of the connection between their pet and puppy mills at the time of purchase.” After watching footage of actual puppy mills and learning that many pet store puppies come from puppy mills, many buyers were regretful, and said that they would never have knowingly purchased a puppy raised in a potentially inhumane facility. Maryland is one of a growing number of states that passed a disclosure law to help consumers understand more about the origins of pet store puppies. Because puppies from puppy mills are often sick, the new law also helps consumers who purchase sick puppies get reimbursement for needed veterinary care.

**Investigators found:**

- Nine out of the twelve stores that investigators visited did not post all the information required by the statute. Some of the stores posted no information on the cages.
- The three stores that did post the required information (Just Puppies in Towson, Just Puppies in Rockville, and Charm City Puppies in Columbia) were found to be receiving puppies from large commercial dealers in some of the nation’s most notorious puppy
mill states, including Arkansas, Iowa, and Missouri. In these three stores, none of the puppies our investigators saw during their visits were from local breeders.

- In one noncompliant pet store, Genesis Pets of Capitol Heights, conditions were so disturbing and one puppy investigators witnessed was so ill that investigators called local law enforcement. Prince George’s County Animal Control responded to the call and seized a sick and malnourished Rottweiler puppy. When ReLove called Animal Control for an update the following week, they were told that Animal Control had taken the puppy to a veterinarian, who diagnosed the puppy with coccidia and pneumonia and determined that he was significantly underweight. At press time it appeared that Animal Control was still in possession of the puppy.

**Maryland puppy-selling pet stores visited**

In September 2013, investigators visited 12 Maryland pet stores that sell puppies to see if and how the stores are complying with Maryland’s 2012 pet store disclosure law. Below is a report on the findings at each of the stores visited, in order of the date visited.

For some stores there is additional information about our visit that we have listed separately, which is not necessarily related to the disclosure law.

**Salisbury Super Pet, Salisbury**
- **Visited:** Sept. 10, 2013
- **Findings:** Not compliant
  No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.”

**Precious Pups, Edgewater**
- **Visited:** Sept. 10, 2013
- **Findings:** Not compliant
  No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.”
  **Additional information about our visit:** The clerk our investigators chatted with said the store buys from “thousands” of breeders.

**Precious Pet Cottage, Millersville**
- **Visited:** Sept. 10, 2013
- **Findings:** Not compliant
  No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.”
Additional information about our visit: Our investigator asked about a white, blue-eyed Aussie puppy offered for sale. She was given the USDA number of a B-licensed dealer (broker) in Missouri who the store owner said had supplied the puppy.¹ The HSUS recommends never purchasing a puppy who came from a broker, due to the difficulty of knowing anything about the actual breeder.

Oakland’s Tropical Pet World, Oakland
Visited: Sept. 12, 2013
Findings: Not compliant
No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.”
Additional information about our visit: The store only had two mixed-breed puppies for sale. The store owner claimed they were from a local accidental litter.

4 Pets, Lavale
Visited: Sept. 12, 2013
Findings: Not compliant
No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the breeder or dealer, if required.”
Additional information about our visit: When asked, an employee said that even if investigators were to purchase a puppy, the store would only provide medical information, not breeder information.

Today’s Pet, Elkridge
Visited: Sept. 24, 2013

¹ The store owner verbally admitted that the white, blue-eyed Aussie was from a double-merle breeding. A “merle” is a dog with certain genetic characteristics which result in splashes of pigment and other interesting color patterns, but merles can also carry genes for vision and hearing disorders. Double merle breeding is the mating of two “merle” dogs, and according to the Australian Shepherd Club of America, Inc. [www.asca.org/factsbreeding], in such matings “a breeder will statistically average one defective, homozygous merle puppy out of four. This will vary from one to many defective puppies in any given litter,” who are likely to “be deaf or have eye defects.” Animal welfare groups believe that ethical breeders should not breed two merles together just to get puppies with interesting color patterns, due to the possibility that some of the puppies will be blind or deaf.
Findings: Mostly non-compliant
No information was posted “conspicuously” on the cages.
The puppies were in cages in a posted “employees only” area behind a glass partition. There
were small tags attached to each cage, but from where customers were allowed to stand, any
information that may have been on these tags was unreadable.

Charm City Puppies, Columbia
Visited: Sept. 24, 2013
Findings: Compliant
Placards in each puppy crib identified the puppy breeders/dealers by USDA number (or the
word “exempt”) and state of origin.
Additional information about our visit: None of the puppies were from local breeders. All
puppies viewed were from states notorious for high numbers of puppy mills, including
Arkansas, Kansas and Missouri.

Genesis Pets, Capitol Heights
Visited: Sept. 24, 2013
Findings: Not compliant; no information posted on the puppy cages
Additional information about our visit: There were only three puppies for sale in the store.
One, a Rottweiler puppy, was visibly sick and underweight, with prominent hip bones and
ribcage. He had greenish mucus coming from his nose and eyes. ReLove Animals reported the
dog’s condition to county animal control immediately after leaving the store. Prince George’s
County Animal Control responded, and based on the condition of the puppy, confiscated the
puppy. A ReLove representative called Animal Control for an update several days later, and was
told that Animal Control had had the puppy examined by a veterinarian, who diagnosed the
puppy with coccidia and pneumonia. At press time it appeared that Animal Control still had
custody of the puppy.

Pet Palace, formerly Pets Galore, Glen Burnie
Visited: Sept. 24, 2013
Findings: Not compliant
No information was posted on the cages regarding “the state in which the breeder or dealer of
the dog is located” or “the United States Department of Agriculture license number of the
breeder or dealer, if required.”
Additional information about our visit: When investigators asked for more information about
one of the puppies, they were shown paperwork for a different dog. The owner stated that the
paperwork and veterinary records on the dog they asked about were “not in yet” even though
the dog was available for sale. Paperwork should always travel with puppies from their point of
origin.

Just Puppies, Towson
Visited: Sept. 26, 2013
Findings: Mostly compliant
Cards attached to most of the puppy cages included a USDA number and state of origin, as well
as other details. Several puppies did not have these cards on their cages. Employees stated that
those puppies had just “come in,” and the staff was still getting organized for the day and would have that information on the cages soon.

**Additional information about our visit:** Many of the suppliers identified on the cards were “B” dealer licensees, which are not necessarily the actual breeders. The HSUS recommends never purchasing a puppy through a broker due to the high likelihood that the puppy may have come from a puppy mill. Most of the puppies in the store were from Missouri, the nation’s largest puppy mill state. It is important for buyers to be able to obtain information about the breeder to find out if there is a history of problems or violations. Investigators did not see any puppies in the store from local breeders.

**Stephanie’s Designer Pups, Conowingo**

*Visited:* Sept. 26, 2013  
*Findings:* Not compliant  
No information was posted on the cages.  
**Additional information about our visit:** Many of the puppies appeared dirty and unsocialized; several of the puppies shrank away from visitors.

**Just Puppies, Rockville**

*Visited:* Sept. 27, 2013  
*Findings:* Mostly compliant  
Cards attached to most of the puppy cages included a USDA number and state of origin, as well as other details. Although this store is listed as mostly compliant, the law requires the information to be posted on each cage, whereas the store had information on several dogs clipped to the top row of each bank of stacked cages, instead of on each individual cage.  
**Additional information about our visit:** Many of the “breeders” identified were “B” dealers, or brokers. Brokers are middlemen, not necessarily the actual breeders. The HSUS recommends never purchasing a puppy supplied by a broker due to the high likelihood that the puppy may have come from a puppy mill. Most of the puppies investigators checked on were from Arkansas or Missouri, two of the biggest puppy mill states. Investigators did not see any puppies from local breeders.

**Conclusion**

The findings bring up both animal welfare and consumer concerns. Due to the poor conditions in which they are raised, puppy mill puppies are often sick and can suffer from crippling genetic disorders. Animal welfare groups have received countless calls from Maryland consumers who unwittingly purchased sick puppies from pet stores.

The 2012 law was designed to help consumers avoid purchasing puppies born in questionable conditions or in puppy mills, by giving consumers some information about the origins of the puppies so they could do their own research before making a purchase. The HSUS calls on Maryland pet stores to fully comply with this simple law which has been in place for almost a year, so consumers have more information about where the dogs were raised.