

October 16, 2020

To the Judiciary Committee, Chair Lisa Baker, Chair Larry Farnese, and Committee Members:

I am writing today on behalf of Erie Puppy Mill Awareness, a 501©3 organization in Pennsylvania that was established in 2015 due to a dire need for education in the area. By abiding by our founding principles of peaceful, tactful, and factual advocacy, we've helped to shape the conversation around what is moral and immoral for dogs and consumers in our state. I'd like to extend gratitude to each of you from our organization for meeting to discuss Pennsylvania Dog Laws and Related Animal Welfare Issues including SB 44, or Victoria's Law.

In 2011, I moved to Erie, PA. As a Veterinary Medical Student, I was thrilled to settle in to an animal friendly town. I remember happily envisioning my future in the area as I drove down Peach Street and past the beautiful Erie Humane Society building in order to get to the Millcreek Mall. The heartbreak I felt when I walked into the mall to see Heartland Pets cannot be explained in a letter. I coached myself that "maybe this store was different" – and I walked inside.

I looked at the puppies for a while. They were the kind that I knew came from mills. Purebreds and the most "in" designer breeds. Evidence of diarrhea staining on their feet and rears was visible to my trained eye, but probably not to the average consumer. One puppy cuddled in a corner, breathing a little too fast and a little too hard. Pneumonia is extremely common in puppy mill puppies because of the perfect storm that is created when you take puppies with below average immune systems away from Moms with below average quality milk and stress them out by putting them into a shipping truck with poor ventilation, allowing them to walk and sleep in their own feces and urine during transit, and then intermingling them with more new puppies with more weak immune systems at the distributor's warehouse, in the cargo of an airplane, or at a pet store. Again, a puppy with pneumonia is usually missed by the average consumer. They are so caught up in the joy of adding a puppy to their family that it is not until later the same day that the veterinarian gets the phone call:

"Hello? I think I need an appointment. The pet store said she was vaccinated. She came home on an antibiotic but they said she was fine. She seems lethargic, and she has discharge from her nose. Should we bring her in?"

I observed another puppy that was older, maybe 4 or 5 months old, and marked as "35% off". I cringed, because I knew that if the pet store sold that puppy for "35% off", they would likely still make a huge profit, and they would still be able to stay in business. Puppy mills create puppies for as cheap as they possibly can. They do this by minimizing care for the breeding dogs. The pictures you've seen of wire bottomed pens with mounds of feces, frozen water dishes, dogs with unattended deep cuts, painful eye diseases left untreated – it is all true, and we have pictures proving that this IS the type of puppy mill that Heartland Pets buys puppies from. So - puppy mills create puppies for super cheap by neglecting their breeding dogs. Then they typically sell their puppies to distributors. Distributors then re-sell the puppies to pet stores. And pet stores mark up the price profusely, pretend that the puppies are from excellent breeders, and then sell the puppies to unknowing consumers. "35% off" still creates great profit, when cruelty is your product.

As I approached that older puppy, she cowered. My heart broke for her. I knew that being raised in a pet store is terrible for her socialization and her ability to ever become an ideal family pet. If you look back in history – dogs were essentially created by people to be companions. Yes, some dogs were specifically bred for work. But most were selected, decade after decade, to hang out near people. Without the proper experiences during the critical socialization period of life, puppies from pet stores are more likely to have behavior problems as adults. They are actually more likely to bite someone in their future<sup>1</sup>. As you may know, the most common victim of a dog bite is a child. Once you know that, you can understand the way my gut ties in knots when I see a puppy that I know has been set up by a pet store and puppy mill for failure.

I gently asked an associate anyway. “Where do you get your puppies from?”. The associate said, “All the puppies come from reputable breeders in the Midwest. Most are Veterinarians.” I told the associate that I am from the Midwest, and asked to see papers from a particular puppy to see if I recognized the town. I was declined that request. I asked if they had ever met any of the breeders that they worked with. The associate responded by calling mall security. My fears were confirmed in that moment, but I knew I needed proof.

Over the next few years I was able to gather hundreds of pages of research from the USDA website<sup>2</sup> proving not only that I was lied to, but that consumers in Erie were continually lied to, and that Heartland Pets does, in fact, get puppies from cruel puppy mills/commercial breeders.

I quickly found 41 “breeders” that Heartland Pets had purchased from<sup>3</sup>. Almost all of them had USDA violations but were still allowed to breed dogs and sell puppies. Many of them had made the HSUS’s Horrible Hundred list. And one, Gary Felts, even had an undercover documentary produced about his horrific kennel via CAPS (Companion Animal Protection Society)<sup>4</sup>.

Please, take a moment to access our research. Read what the dogs endure. Look at the pictures of their pain. Do we, as a state, want to empower this type of treatment to animals? How can we look the other way? We have a chance to make a difference.

With all of this data, we were hopeful that we could make change for Erie’s people and for animals nationwide. We knew that stopping the store sales of puppy mill puppies was a big step because the “impulse buy” is the main type of purchase that occurs from pet stores and other puppy mill outlets. We formed a board of directors. We place billboard ads. We did news segments. We interviewed on the radio. We hosted nights at the local minor league baseball games. We handed out flyers. We enlisted help of local college students. We fundraised. We petitioned. We sold t-shirts. We tried to reason with the Millcreek Mall. We arranged for the HSUS to personally help the owner of Heartland Pets make the switch to a humane model. We presented our hundreds of pages of information to the Millcreek Township board. We rallied other local animal welfare groups including Erie Area Rescue Society, HOPE, and Because You Care. We rented booths at all the local events. We created a Patch Program for Girl

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/canine-corner/201603/are-dogs-purchased-pet-stores-more-aggressive>

<sup>2</sup> In February 2016, the public was denied access to view these USDA inspections any longer, so new research cannot be performed.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.eriepupmillaawareness.org/proof-of-heartland-pets--puppy-mill-breeders.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.caps-web.org/felts-gary-black-diamond-kennel/>

and Boy Scout Troops. We created a Book Program that helps kids to understand puppy mills. We have worked tirelessly to promote change in Erie. Though we've made progress, and we've created enough interest to help get us where we are with Victoria's Law today – it has never been more clear that this is a case in which laws need to be created. Stopping the horrific puppy mill industry can't be done by consumers alone. Laws are created to close the gap between what SHOULD be done, and what MUST be done.

Car Dealerships cannot lie about what they are selling to a consumer without repercussion.

Cigarette companies can no longer pretend that their product doesn't carry a risk.

Why can puppy mills and pet stores still get away with lying about the source and health of living creatures?

The puppy mill industry hurts all that it touches. It hurts the consumers that are sold puppies which are more likely to bite their family members, carry multi-drug resistant illnesses that lead to human outbreaks<sup>5</sup>, and have lifelong genetic illnesses. The industry hurts the puppies – who are raised in ways deprived of adequate socialization and lead them to be significantly afflicted with fear, anxiety, and stress for the rest of their lives. It hurts the breeding dogs – which live in conditions that would ignite rage and horror in any decent person's heart. It hurts the shelter systems – which must continually take in, rehabilitate, and hopefully, rehome dogs that are relinquished after impulse purchases from pet stores and puppy mills, or when owners realize their \$3,000 puppy has a lifelong illness and a behavior problem that they weren't prepared for.

Victoria's Law is an essential next step. When enacted, it will drastically reduce the number of puppies sold from puppy mills because people will not succumb to the "impulse purchase". Without puppy mill puppies on display at pet stores or flea markets, people will no longer be able to accidentally get pulled into the puppy mill trap by a bouncing puppy with big eyes and a bow in its fur. People go to the mall for shoes and come home with a puppy. People go to a flea market to look for farmhouse décor and leave with a puppy. The emotional impulse purchase is the bread and butter for cruel pet stores and puppy mills.

Let's be clear. The only people that Victoria's Law doesn't protect – are those who are exploiting consumers and the lives of innocent animals for their own financial gain. Victoria's Law is not the end all be all fix to the puppy mill problem. However, it is a massive step in the right direction. Victoria's Law is common sense legislation that protects animals and consumers by guiding Pennsylvania's animal industry to more humane sources such as reputable breeding programs and humane pet store models.

As a veterinarian, I've taken an oath to Do No Harm. This includes speaking out against this horrific industry. Thank you for your consideration in passing SB 44, Victoria's Law.

Sincerely,  
Denise Radford, DVM  
Erie Puppy Mill Awareness Founder

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/campylobacter/outbreaks/puppies-12-19/index.html>