



**Testimony before the  
Senate Judiciary Committee  
Agriculture Deputy Secretary Fred Strathmeyer  
& Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement Director Kristen Donmoyer  
Tuesday, October 20, 2020**

Good Morning Senate Judiciary Committee members and thank you for the opportunity to discuss SB 663. We are Fred Strathmeyer, Deputy Secretary and Kristen Donmoyer, the Director of the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement, housed within the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. We are here today because the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement is essential to protecting the health and safety of Pennsylvania residents and our canine companions. Simply put, our mission, and the health and safety of dogs and puppies in Pennsylvania is in jeopardy. We appreciate the opportunity to make you aware of the greatest immediate threat to canine health and safety in the Commonwealth, and the solution to avoid disaster.

Since the General Assembly passed some of the most stringent requirements for protecting dogs in commercial kennels in 2008, the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement (Bureau) has been enforcing these statutes and requirements, including routine inspections of all licensed kennels to ensure compliance with critical health and safety standards. While there is always more that we can do to improve the quality of care for all dogs, we must first look at what we currently have and ensure that sufficient financial support and resources are available to enforce the laws and regulations that have worked to save canine lives and improve their welfare across the Commonwealth. We cannot afford to lose the progress we have made, and it will cost more to recover that progress – in lost or injured dogs and puppies, injured or even lost human life, and significant increases in financial and personnel resources for local governments and law enforcement. Due to a financial crisis, the Bureau is at risk of being eliminated. That means the Bureau will no longer be able to regulate kennels and dangerous dogs, or to pick up stray dogs and provide financial support to shelters to house those stray dogs. Imagine what kennels would look like without being regulated, without experienced dog wardens inspecting licensed kennels to ensure animals are not being neglected? Sick dogs will be sold to unknowing consumers, no one will ensure dangerous dogs are kept safely away from the public, and stray dogs will be left wandering the streets. Without the passage of SB 663, the Bureau will no longer be able to enforce the Dog Law and protect dogs and public safety.

Some of you have heard this before, as our financial situation has been at risk for several years. It is only due to extraordinary administrative measures, such as not filling dog warden positions, finding and implementing every efficiency allowed under current statute, and supplementing our budget with GGO dollars, that we have not gone into the red before now. The Bureau's duties were designed to be self-funded, through the sale of annual and lifetime dog licenses. However, the fees are set in statute and have not been raised in 24 years. SB 663 would raise the cost of an annual dog license from \$6.50 to \$10. It would also require puppies to be licensed at the point of sale, eliminating an unintended loophole that allows puppies to be sold at eight weeks of age but does not require the puppy be licensed until twelve weeks of age. This is pivotal to getting more dogs licensed, ensuring financial stability for the Bureau.



We'd like to illustrate why the loss of the Bureau and the services we provide are the most immediate threats to the welfare of dogs in Pennsylvania. The loss of the Bureau would put an unfair financial burden on local governments and law enforcement, during a time when both are being asked to do more with less. Counties or municipalities will face an impossible decision: raise revenue to cover these vital services, which will likely cost more to the taxpayer to administer duplicative programs than a statewide program, or even worse, to not provide the services at all. The burden of stray dogs, increased cruelty referrals, more frequent infectious and contagious disease outbreaks, and increased dog bite incidents will unfairly fall on law enforcement, continually asked to do more with less.

As the only agency in the state that can inspect state licensed kennels without a search warrant, we have a vital responsibility and duty to ensure the safety and welfare of dogs in kennels. Often, when you hear about dogs being seized from a kennel, it was due to a dog warden making a cruelty referral to a humane society police officer or police officer after a routine inspection or investigating a complaint. The dog wardens (who receive humane society police officer training) are the first line responders for potential animal cruelty in kennels. We ensure kennel owners are being held accountable for maintaining adequate living conditions for the dogs and puppies and strive to ensure Pennsylvania's dog breeding industry maintains high standards of care and continue to improve the image of the dog breeding industry. As a small business, kennel operators rely on quality inspections and reports to show consumers their kennel is a good place to buy a puppy or adopt a dog.

When you read the headlines in the news about dogs being seized for poor health and horrific living conditions, oftentimes, it is from an illegal kennel operation. Illegal kennels or underground kennel operations are not regulated, these are the places most notoriously known as "puppy mills," where sickly dogs are bred and sold unbeknownst to the public. The Bureau works tirelessly to follow up on complaints from the public, cross-referencing and analyzing records obtained from licensed kennels, and monitoring puppy advertising sites, to gain enough evidence to obtain a search warrant to shut these illegal operations down. Cases like this often result in animal cruelty referrals to humane society police officers. Dog wardens and humane society police officers work together in cases like this, often sharing information, so either organization can get enough evidence to obtain a search warrant, where oftentimes, charges from both organizations are warranted. It is not just about catching illegal kennel operators, it is also about education and prevention to maintain the integrity of the dog breeding industry in Pennsylvania and keep the reputation of "Puppy Mill Capital of the East" at bay. The Bureau attends meetings with breeders to discuss the Dog Law requirements, when a kennel license is needed, and best practices for animal welfare and well-being. These meetings have been productive in getting more folks licensed, regulated, and in compliance with the Dog Law. It only takes one bad actor or illegal kennel to ruin the image for all Pennsylvania dog breeders who are small business owners in many of your districts across the Commonwealth.

The Bureau is also solely responsible for the maintenance of a statewide dangerous dog registry. Any dog that attacks a person or pet and is deemed dangerous in court requires follow-up and registration for the remainder of the dog's life. This is one of the most important duties of the Bureau as it relates to public safety. Although police can handle an initial dangerous dog case, it is the dog warden who follows up with registration, subsequent annual inspections, and updates the data in the registry viewable by the public. The personnel and resources it takes to follow-up and maintain an accurate



statewide registry for dangerous dogs would be costly for counties and local law enforcement to implement. In fact, in the few counties or municipalities that do administer components of the Dog Law at the local level, the cost of a dog license can be up to \$35 per year, compared to \$10 as proposed in SB 663.

In addition to inspecting kennels and monitoring dangerous dogs the Bureau also picks up and transports stray dogs to shelters. Shelters receive money from the Bureau for taking in and holding stray dogs. Prior to 2012 shelters were eligible to receive grants from the Bureau, but as the Bureau's funding declined, the grants were terminated. Currently, the Bureau reimburses shelters \$40 for holding a stray dog. Due to insufficient funds, this reimbursement will be lowered from \$40 to the minimum required by statute which is \$5. This is going to make it difficult to find a shelter willing to hold stray dogs, an impact that will affect everyone. Counties or municipalities can expect to be charged or charged more to hold stray dogs because the Bureau is no longer able to cover these costs without the passage of SB 663.

From inspecting kennels, investigating illegal kennels, reuniting stray dogs with their families to protecting the public from dangerous dogs, the Bureau has played an important role in the community. And we wish to continue doing so. Without funding to the Bureau, no other positive changes can happen. The funding is the foundation to preserve and expand on the progress we have already made.

There is widespread stakeholder support for this proposal. Groups like the Dog Law Advisory Board, the PA Veterinary Medical Association, and kennel owners have championed this cause due to the widespread effects it will have on communities, businesses, and the health of dogs across the commonwealth. The PA Association of Police Chiefs and the PA Association of Sheriffs have cited the critical support that dog wardens provide law enforcement. Local government officials and the PA Treasurers Association have noted the important fiscal implications of not funding the bureau. SB 663 provides valuable resources to groups that help our commonwealth function.

Like you, we have taken a vow to serve the public, and we see this as a crucial step in fulfilling that promise. We urge you to contact the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, as well as House and Senate leadership, to ensure they understand the risks to canine well-being, public safety, local governments, and law enforcement. We must pass the fee increase and lower the age to license a puppy as proposed in SB 663 to restore funding to the Bureau and continue to protect Pennsylvania's dogs, puppies, and communities.