

## Force for Good

Task force's behind-the-scenes legwork makes dramatic puppy mill rescues possible



Justin Scally, manager of the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force, often deploys to join other trained animal welfare rescuers and volunteers at the scene of puppy mill raids around the country.

**When you see video clips** of animal welfare personnel carrying filthy, matted puppies and parent dogs out of the horrendous conditions in the cramped cages of a puppy mill, it often seems like the whole story: The rescuers have swooped in, saving the abused animals and starting them on a journey toward safety, love, and new lives. But a lot has to happen behind the scenes—often months of careful preparation, long before anyone

steps foot onto the property—to make such scenes possible.

The major raids that result in the rescue of dogs from puppy mills typically begin not with dramatic stakeouts, but rather emerge from a flurry of phone calls, e-mails, and paperwork. Background information has to be gathered, cases have to be developed, and relationships forged with local law enforcement, veterinarians, and staff and volunteers

from humane societies and rescue groups. And all the resources needed to execute a raid have to be assembled, so that everything's ready to roll when the time is right. It takes experienced, specially trained people to make this happen.

The goal of the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force—part of the larger Stop Puppy Mills campaign of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)—is to provide expert

## [q&a]

guidance to local law enforcement, animal shelters, and other agencies, as well as support other HSUS experts in the investigation and execution of raids/rescues on puppy mill operations. The task force represents a dramatic expansion of HSUS resources and was made possible by a donation from the Kenneth and Lillian Wilde estate; the Wildes cared for many pets and strays throughout their lives.

The task force offers a wide array of services, ranging from telephone consultations to field response assistance all the way up to full-response deployment of HSUS staff resources and equipment, including setting up an emergency animal shelter for veterinary triage and temporary animal sheltering. It also operates a toll-free puppy mill hotline, created to encourage calls for help from people with information about puppy mills.

Since launching in July 2009, the task force has been involved in rescuing nearly 2,000 animals. It has also provided telephone consultation for cases involving almost 500 more. Staff members have fielded hundreds of calls from concerned members of the public, sifting through this flood of information to find the tips that could lead to a puppy mill bust, such as the raids in Texas and Tennessee that rescued 550 and 223 animals, respectively.

As manager of the task force, Justin Scally works with law enforcement agencies to build cruelty cases against puppy mill operators and then try to ensure successful prosecutions in court. Formerly the director of the Wayne County Department of Animal Control Services in North Carolina, Scally was also sworn as a special deputy sheriff and volunteer firefighter. He's trained in investigations, rescue operations, emergency management/response, leadership, animal care, and enforcement, and is a certified crime scene investigator.

Michelle Cascio is the task force's casework coordinator, managing the puppy mill tip line, gathering actionable information, and helping to develop cases. Cascio joined The HSUS in November 2007 as shelter services coordinator in the Companion Animals section; before that, she managed animal care, volunteer, and adoption programs for one of the two facilities of the Washington Humane Society in Washington, D.C.

In this edited interview with Jim Baker, staff writer/copy editor of *Animal Sheltering*, Scally and Cascio talk about the first year of the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force—their successes, and the obstacles they've faced.

### **Animal Sheltering: What is it that the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force does?**

**Justin Scally:** Essentially, we act as the enforcement arm of the Stop Puppy Mills campaign. When we get a complaint, we're going to check into it. We'll provide guidance and expertise to law enforcement, provide on-the-ground assistance. We realize that a lot of places that deal with these puppy mill situations don't have the resources or, many times, the expertise to handle such a situation. Obviously, each and every dog's a piece of evidence, the property's a piece of evidence, and so it has to be handled accordingly. ... It's the whole law enforcement approach that maybe a local ACO is not used to doing. ... We want to be able to provide that resource to them nationally, so that we can help them make sure that the animals are rescued, they're able to do their job, and justice is served.

### **What kind of calls do you get at the tip line?**

**Michelle Cascio:** It runs the gamut. We have a lot of advocates doing their own investigations, maybe into classified ads or Internet ads, and they see a breeder listing many, many different types of breeds, so they're pretty sure that person is a puppy miller. But breeding multiple breeds isn't an illegal activity, so then we have to explain to them that we need an eyewitness account, someone that will maybe even sign a sworn statement down the road, if we are in the process of helping local law enforcement bring charges or get a search warrant. It starts with teaching our wonderful advocates what's legal and what isn't, and what we need [for a complaint] to be actionable. And it runs all the way to a sheriff calling us because they've just responded to a complaint, and they've found 300 breeding dogs in filthy conditions, underweight, other medical or health issues, and they need our assistance immediately.



Michelle Cascio, casework coordinator for the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force, cuddles a puppy rescued from a mass-breeding facility in Tennessee. Cascio manages the task force's puppy mill tip line and helps to develop cases against those who profit from these inhumane operations.

### **Can anyone call the tip line if they have something that they want to report?**

**Cascio:** Yes, they can. [Many of] our calls are just public citizens who have concerns. Maybe they went to purchase a dog, and the breeder said, "Yeah, sure, come to my house, and I'll sell the puppy to you. I breed the dogs in my home." And they come to the home, and the home doesn't look so great, and it definitely doesn't smell very good, and they bring out this bad-looking puppy, whether he's underweight or he's covered in feces, and they hear a lot of dogs barking in the background, but they can't get a good look at the breeding operation. They call us because they want to know if they've been to a puppy mill. That's when probably the bulk of my work happens, is trying to figure out if there's something actionable for us, based on their information.

### **What are some big successes that you had in the last year?**

**Scally:** The case in Kaufman [Texas] was a huge success. [Five hundred and fifty animals were rescued from a puppy mill there in August 2009. Texas subsequently brought a case against breeder Peggy Boyd, the owner of Klassie Kennels.] We were contacted by a





Members of the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force often spend months doing the behind-the-scenes legwork that makes the raids on mass-breeding facilities possible. Their efforts lead to the rescue of dogs from deplorable conditions—the start of their journey to safe, loving homes.

local humane society that said that a person had come to them; they had a food bank, a dog food bank, and said, “I need help feeding my dogs.” And they said, “Well, how many dogs?” “I’ve got 400 dogs.” And so we were contacted. ... What we did basically was we sent an undercover investigator ... to deliver the food to this person’s property, and they were wired. And so while they were there, they were able to get video and audio, and we then in turn took that to the sheriff, and that’s what enabled us to get the warrants.

#### **It was a puppy mill?**

**Scally:** Yes. All types of small-breed dogs. And the conditions there were horrible. There were dead piles—piles of dead dogs, and trash, there were dogs that were dying, animals with open wounds. It was horrible. One of the rooms—I’ll never forget—probably had the most strong ammonia smell I have ever experienced. I walked into this room, and my lungs felt like they were on fire. We [had to] put on a respirator. Those dogs are forced to live in those cages and breed, and breed, and breed, in order to increase profits for these people. It’s for nothing but the dol-

lar. And these dogs were sitting in there suffering. You’d pick up the dog, and they were covered in urine and feces to the point that their fur was sticky—it was sticking to your skin and your clothing. So imagine what they felt like, on a hot, humid day, sitting there in their own excrement.

#### **Did they shut this place down?**

**Scally:** She was charged with cruelty and has since pled guilty. She was fined; I wasn’t very happy with the actual sentencing, but she was fined, community service. ... There were also conditions that would prevent her from being able to operate a breeding business in the future.

**Tell me about the recent Tennessee bust. [The HSUS was called in by the White County Sheriff’s Department to lead the rescue of 221 dogs and two cats from Gayla’s Poodle Palace in Sparta. All of the animals were surrendered to the custody of the sheriff’s department.]**

**Scally:** I received a call from our Tennessee state director, Leighann McCollum, and basically what she said was, “I’ve just received

### **What You Should Do**

The Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force offers these tips for animal welfare groups that participate in the rescue of puppy mill dogs:

- Document, document, document! Record information, and capture images of the scene; everything you see is potential evidence in a cruelty case.
- For that reason, don’t bathe or feed the animals until you’ve documented their physical condition.
- Plan ahead. Make contact with a local veterinarian who has training or experience in cruelty investigation, and arrange for emergency housing of the animals, as well as the resources you may need (such as staff and volunteers).
- Remember you’re dealing with a possible crime scene; photograph and diagram it and any evidence.
- Photographs should be taken at a distance, then mid range, and finally close up; include multiple views of all animals.
- Call the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force for guidance or assistance.

### **Share Your Concerns**

Do you think there might be a puppy mill in your community? Are you a law enforcement officer who has “insider” knowledge of an inhumane breeder? The Humane Society of the United States’ toll-free puppy mill tip line, 877-MILL-TIP, was created to encourage those who have any information to contact the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force for help.

a call from a sheriff in White County that says that he’s on the scene, or his deputies are on the scene, of a puppy mill situation in Sparta, Tenn.” And I said, “OK, well, go ahead and let’s get in contact with him, and let’s see what we can do to help him out.

## [q&a]



KATHY MILANI/THE HSUS

An early success of the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force was helping to coordinate the rescue of 221 dogs and two cats from Gayla's Poodle Palace in Sparta, Tenn. A call from White County Sheriff Oddie J. Shoupe led to the deployment of resources to the scene.

It's going to be tough, because he's already on the scene, but we can see what we can do." We end up getting on the phone with this guy—wonderful sheriff, [Sheriff Oddie J. Shoupe], who is a strong advocate for animals, and we couldn't ask for anything better out of him—we were on the phone with him, trying to make arrangements to come in to help him with the situation, because the original estimate was that there were only 80 dogs, and then it went to 100 and then 150, and then it went to over 200. He had dealt with a puppy mill situation before, but he was totally lost on where to go from here. We kept in constant contact, we deployed resources. Unfortunately, prior to us even leaving, the district attorney had made an arrangement that [the

owner] would surrender the animals and no charges would be filed.

### **Do you ever encounter folks in law enforcement who are not sympathetic to what you're trying to do?**

**Scally:** Sometimes they don't get it. Maybe they're not sympathetic to the issue; maybe they don't see necessarily that it's a problem. There's different viewpoints. Some of them, they tell you that's how they were raised, and that's just how it is.

**Cascio:** Or they may be related to the suspect.

**Scally:** There might be a relationship. We've had cases like that, where there's been a family relationship or a friendship that has been involved with the suspect, and so, because of that, they cover for them.

### **So is that frustrating for you, when you present evidence, and you have to walk away?**


**Scally:** Of course, because we're looking at these animals who are suffering.

**Cascio:** And by the time we push it to that level, we have real evidence, not speculation, not rumor and innuendo, but usually very hard evidence.

### **If law enforcement won't move on your evidence, does that mean your case can't proceed?**

**Scally:** Unless we can come up with another option. And sometimes there are other options, but that's not always the case ... I distinctly remember one case where law enforcement just sat there and told me, "We're just not doing it." And the district attorney and the sheriff would blame it on each other. The district attorney would say, "It's because of the sheriff that we're not doing it," and the sheriff would say, "It's because of the district attorney that we're not doing it." And the only thing that we could figure was, in this particular county, there was a puppy mill bust before, and apparently they caught some flak, because there's a lot of puppy mills in their community. So maybe that brought concern that if they did another one, they're up for reelection, it's going to be fresh in their constituents' minds, and instead of supporting them, they won't get their votes.

**Cascio:** And on occasion, you might have a sheriff that would like to be cooperative, but he doesn't have the resources. They have maybe a single ACO or a part-time ACO, and they have a six-run kennel or they're contracting for their animal housing with a local vet, they have no shelter, and now there are 300 animals. And they haven't done anything about it ... because they don't know what to do about it. So a lot of times when we call in then and start talking about how we can help and how we can provide a full deployment—housing, animal removal, evidence collection, emergency animal sheltering and then placement, and we can show up and do that for them—they're suddenly very cooperative.

**Scally:** And sometimes they're hesitant from the beginning, and once all is said and done, they'll come back to us and say, "Wow, you guys did a really good job. We appreciate your help." 

To learn more about the Stop Puppy Mills campaign, and the Wilde Puppy Mill Task Force, go online to [humane-society.org/issues/puppy\\_mills](http://humane-society.org/issues/puppy_mills).