At The HSUS, we come to the aid of animals in need.

Whether through our network of animal care centers, our veterinary services programs that reach into rural and poverty-stricken areas, or our emergency response teams that rescue animals in crisis, we directly touch the lives of tens of thousands of animals every year—more than any other animal protection group in the nation.

But The HSUS does so much more than provide hands-on care. We take on the toughest, biggest, and most stubborn forms of institutionalized cruelty, and try to arrest and prevent these abuses from continuing. We are outlawing cruel confinement practices on factory farms and exposing slaughterhouse abuses, as we did in passing Proposition 2 in California. We are shutting down puppy mills and passing laws to crack down on others. We are putting the lid on canned shoots.

We are working to end, once and for all, Canada’s barbaric seal hunt.

And we are relentless in our efforts to root out dogfighting and cockfighting. The HSUS has molded nearly all of the state and federal laws that forbid this conduct. We train thousands of law enforcement officials to investigate animal fighting crimes, and our own investigations, reward programs, and tip lines result in raids on hundreds of fighting operations. Our community-based programs—such as the one with ex-dogfighter Sean Moore profiled in this issue of All Animals—steer at-risk youth from involvement in this underworld.

After word broke of Michael Vick’s involvement in dogfighting, we marshaled resources to see that state and federal authorities prosecuted him and the other dogfighters operating Bad Newz Kennels. We also worked to channel the public’s outrage about those terrible crimes into productive action, passing new animal fighting laws in Congress and in 23 states.

A few months ago, when Vick approached The HSUS about getting involved in our anti-dogfighting efforts, my instinct was to dismiss the idea as a transparent attempt to rehabilitate his image. But I also knew that dogfighting, especially with young African American men, is an epidemic in urban communities, and maybe we could use Vick to help tackle this grave problem.

I don’t know if Vick’s arrest, incarceration, and loss of more than $100 million changed him at his core. But I do know that The HSUS wants to eliminate dogfighting, and that we need innovative strategies to tackle the problem, perhaps using ex-felons like Vick to tell their stories to kids. To me, his professional interest in redeeming himself is not a problem, but an insurance policy to keep him focused on the long-term task of combating this despicable practice.

You see, at The HSUS, we are single-minded in our goal to eradicate animal fighting. In fact, when we turn enemies into allies—like swords into plowshares—that’s the essence of our work.

We at The HSUS are about social change—changing both individuals and social institutions. That means we don’t just take the easy cases, but the toughest ones, like Vick’s. And just maybe if there had been an intervention program in Vick’s hometown of Newport News two decades ago, the little boy who started dogfighting when he was 8 years old, as Vick told me he did, would have grown to love and respect pit bulls, and he would not have done these terrible things to dogs.

For me, it was never about providing endless punitive treatment to Michael Vick. He’s one of tens of thousands of people who’ve recently participated in dogfighting, and if we fail to concentrate on the people we need to reach, we are losing sight of our goal. It’s not only about meting out appropriate punishment for people who violate the law, but also steering people away from the activity in the first place, or giving them a pathway out. It’s about building new and better relationships with animals, and not treating people as if they are in a static state. It’s about having kids today put down their break sticks and destroy their pit bull treadmills in favor of kindness and dog behavior training.

Animal abuse is a painful thing, and it rightly angers us. But it’s all around us. And the people involved in doing bad things to animals are among the people we most urgently need to reach. And we don’t reach them by turning away, but by confronting the problem.