

Rehab Project

The hard work of turning puppy mill dogs into pets yields extraordinary rewards for shelters and adopters

BY JIM BAKER



MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS

Puppy mill dogs often come from inhumane environments where they are deprived of any positive interactions with humans. Many need some time, treats, and affection to begin thinking of people as friends.

The official on the phone explains the situation: A raid on a puppy mill in your area is imminent, and she expects a seizure of a large number of dogs, most likely in poor condition. Can your shelter take them in? Provide long-term housing while custody issues are resolved? Rehabilitate these fearful, hurting creatures, and get them ready for adoption?

If you're Suzy Swims, you say "yes."

Swims, director of operations at the Norfolk SPCA in Virginia, has taken calls like this at least half a dozen times, so she knows exactly what to do when they come in. Her shelter immediately swings into what she calls "puppy mill mode." Before a single dog arrives, staff and volunteers set up kennels

with clean bedding, bowls of fresh food and water, and stuffed animals. They put together an intake station, where each animal will be documented and receive a name band. They establish vaccination and bathing stations, too. The morning after the dogs hit the shelter, the staff comes in a few hours early to take them all out for their first potty break, playtime, and breath of fresh air. It's the beginning of the dogs' first steps toward health and socialization. They're starting a journey that the shelter staff hopes will result in their eventual adoption.

It's an impressive system, and these days, all the pieces of the shelter's response usually tick like clockwork. But Swims is quick to

admit that this process wasn't always a model of efficiency, especially when the staff and volunteers were new to the drill. "Our first [puppy mill intake] was ... not that great," she says, chuckling at the memory.

That's no surprise: taking in puppy mill dogs, treating them, housing them, rehabilitating them, and finding them homes is a complicated, stressful process, and a learning curve should be expected. Most shelters' plans for such a challenge are works in progress, and they're always striving to improve their performance, listen to feedback, and find better approaches.

Some shelters around the country have worked on major puppy mill seizures so many

times that they have created reliable, ready-to-go systems. From intake through adoption, they've found strategies and techniques that work, helping them turn skittish, unsocialized dogs into companion animals that people will want to take home.

Let's Get Physical

If faced with the prospect of caring for scores of stinky, squirming, frightened puppy mill dogs, what do you do? Where do you even *begin*?

Some shelters would understandably freak out. But not the staff and volunteers of the Humane Society of Missouri, who have many years of experience handling these situations. Missouri is often considered the epicenter of the puppy mill trade in the United States. Approximately 40 percent of all pet store puppies are bred in the state, where almost 200,000 breeding dogs produce up to a million puppies a year.

Those numbers have made the staff of the Humane Society of Missouri real pros at handling the needs of seized puppy mill dogs. "We've been doing this for so long that we really do have a set list of procedures that we follow, so it's actually—I don't want to say 'routine'—but it is fairly organized," says Linda Campbell, a certified professional dog trainer (CPDT) and a 30-year veteran of the shelter, where she's the director of programs.

Team members often assist on-site at the bust, pick up the animals included in a warrant issued by local authorities, and transport them back to the shelter. A triage team is set up and waiting for them, with veterinarians, technicians, and shelter workers. Each dog is photographed, tagged, and gets a complete initial physical, so any health issues can be identified. The shelter waits to deal with behavior issues, says Campbell; the top priority is to give the dogs relief from suffering caused by longstanding neglect. That often means bathing and grooming them, washing away months or even years of accumulated filth, which goes a long way toward helping the dogs feel much better. Staff treats their medical problems, easing the pain of mange or skin infections, and they provide treatment for flea and tick infestation. The more com-



One of the first steps during the intake of puppy mill dogs is a physical examination of each dog, with veterinarians and staff checking for medical conditions that need immediate care. This pup was one of more than 200 dogs rescued in a 2009 HSUS raid on a puppy mill in New Albany, Ind.

fortable the dogs can be made to feel, the more likely they are to relax, shelter staff say.

It's important to try to keep the dogs calm—or as calm as they can be. "We try not to stress them too much in the beginning. They've been through enough, and you have to give them time," says Connie Brooks, director of operations at SPCA Tampa Bay in Largo, Fla. "Some of them have never seen people, except for their caretaker that feeds them. There are a lot of them who ... never have the emotional attachment to humans. They don't understand it."

Room at the Inn

Once the intake process is complete, shelters have to consider the next hurdle: housing. Not only do they have to find room for the puppy mill dogs, but they have to do it in a way that protects them (and the rest of the shelter population) and best promotes their rehabilitation.

The staff at the SPCA of Texas starts thinking about housing issues before the seized dogs enter the Dallas shelter. The goal is to reduce the animals' stress as they're taken from a familiar—if horrible—environment into one that's entirely new. Having a record of where the dogs were, and who they were with, at the site of the seizure helps the shelter provide some familiar company, says Ann Barnes, senior vice president of operations. "When we bring them back here, we try to re-create that same setup, as far as who's kenneled together and who are neighbors. The stress of packing them up and moving them [to the shelter] is enough already."

Puppy mill dogs are given medical and behavior evaluations, and then the staff starts to separate them according to a color-coded system: green, yellow, and red. Green applies to dogs who have retained some social skills and aren't overly fearful. Yellow indicates those whose behavior is located somewhere in the



NORFOLK SPCA

It's always a joyful moment when the shelter staff gets to take puppy mill dogs for their first experience of outdoor playtime. It's also a great opportunity to socialize them, as Kari Vincent, community outreach and volunteer manager at the Norfolk SPCA, demonstrates.

middle of the spectrum. And red dogs? They'll need a lot of work. Dogs who have been assigned the same color, and who were housed together at the puppy mill, stay together. The entire group of seized dogs is housed in a temporary, movable kenneling system under a tent outside the shelter, away from the rest of the population. "We find that if we move the reds away from the yellows, the yellows kind of turn around on their own. The reds are kind of like the troublemakers," Barnes says. "We'll move them to the far end, and they'll get the most attention from the volunteers."

Dogs in the green group are often ready for adoption soon after they arrive.

The Oregon Humane Society typically has four "pods" of dogs available for adoption, and when the shelter takes in puppy mill dogs, the staff closes down one of those pods to house them. (This pod is off-limits to the public; the staff also puts paper over the windows. This spares the dogs—who came from an environment where they rarely saw humans—from the stress of having people watching them every day.) The dogs are groomed and then spayed and

neutered. Volunteers who have more advanced skills working with shy dogs clean their kennels, and talk calmly to them, providing consistency throughout their stay.

While nervous about people, most of the dogs are used to being around other dogs. "That's a plus, because you can typically house them together in groups," says Tanya Roberts, CPDT, manager of the shelter's training and behavior department. Puppy mill dogs can often be paired up and housed together, because they're used to the company of canines. This is typically a



Once news hits that puppy mill dogs are available for adoption, the response is often tremendous. In this instance, the Norfolk SPCA received 200 applications for about 30 puppy mill dogs.

bleeding for shelters that are hard-pressed for space.

The shelter's staff also tries to match dogs, placing the most skittish ones with those who are dog-friendly and a little more confident. "I think it helps, because we know dogs learn from watching and seeing other animals do things. So from a potty-training perspective, that's really good," Roberts says.

Work with Me

Once the housing issues have been sorted out, staff and volunteers can focus their attention on socialization—a task that requires patience and typically moves forward in a series of baby steps. Shelter trainers and behaviorists describe this process as one of establishing a routine, so the dogs know what to expect; working with them day by day; and slowly moving the dogs—sometimes inch by inch—out of their comfort zones. Rushing these dogs to accept handling and other novel experiences can actually derail their progress, trainers say. It usually takes time before they'll approach people, soliciting and accepting human attention.

Puppy mill dogs often exhibit behaviors that come from living all their lives in filthy conditions, without enrichment, and in close quarters with many other dogs. Because they never had the opportunity to relieve themselves away from where they eat and sleep, they're used to living in their own waste and are rarely housetrained. Because they had to compete against other dogs for food, they often display food aggression. And, of course, their interactions with humans have usually been severely limited, and often negative.

The Oregon Humane Society uses Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP), a synthetic pheromone that's designed to reduce fear and stress-related behavior in puppies and adult dogs, to help puppy mill dogs begin to learn appropriate potty habits. The staff sprays the product, which also comes in an electric diffuser, on the dogs' bedding. "We've found that DAP helps dogs target their beds to sleep in and not to poop on, which is a problem with a lot of these puppy mill dogs," says Roberts. At first, she says, "You put a blanket down, they go over and pee and poo on it. We go, 'No, that's your bed, keep your bed clean!'" DAP helps the



Veterinary staff of the Norfolk SPCA delivered these puppies by cesarian from a shih tzu named Jocelyn who was taken in from a puppy mill raid. All of the puppies went right into foster care with their mother, and they were officially adopted once they reached 8 weeks of age.

dogs see their blankets as a place to relax and sleep.

The SPCA of Texas has found a way to help puppy mill dogs who exhibit food aggression. "We free-feed them. They have to understand that while they're with us, they won't ever be without food," Barnes says.

The staff puts out big, rubber livestock bowls—the kind used to feed grain to horses. "That's what we put in with each single dog, so they have an unlimited supply of food in front of them, even if it's a Chihuahua. It will always be there, so they won't have to gorge themselves. A majority of the time, they turn themselves around, and we don't have any more issues."

Of course, the crucial part of socialization is helping puppy mill dogs to become comfortable and bonded with people, so that they can be adopted. They'll also have to get used to scary things like big, open spaces and walking on a leash. "The main challenge is just fear itself. They're fine with dogs, because most of them have lived with many dogs. It's the fear of being with humans," Brooks says. "It's the ones that have been in [puppy mills] the longest that we

have the hardest time with; they don't have an attachment to humans."

When the dogs first come in, many are terrified, and respond by shutting down or cowering in a corner. "For some of those dogs, we may not even take them out of the cage for socialization. We may just spend time walking by and tossing treats in their kennel. Some are so fearful, they won't even touch food in your presence," Campbell says.

The staff and volunteers at the Norfolk SPCA are dedicated to working with the dogs until they're adopted. The socialization process there often involves giving baths, touching them, taking them outside for playtime, taking them on a walk, or even taking them home for a night. Small steps like these can make a big difference. The SPCA of Texas, for instance, looks for low-stress ways of getting the dogs to trust them. A volunteer will take a book, and just sit and read in a dog's run for 30 minutes, not making eye contact at all. Soon, the dog will start coming around and will sit next to the volunteer,

not wanting to be touched yet, but sitting there calmly.

It's all about baby steps. Volunteers at The Humane Society of Oregon put leashes and harnesses on puppy mill dogs, and let them get used to wearing them, even if that simply means allowing the leashes to drag behind them on the floor. Then they'll try walking the dogs up and down in their runs, progressing to walks in the puppy mill pod, and, finally, they'll take them for walks outside.

Of course, this requires manpower, and few shelters have enough people on staff to individually socialize dozens of puppy mill dogs at once. That's why shelters such as the Oregon Humane Society and the Humane Society of Missouri have found it indispensable to have a group of trained volunteers to handle these tasks. They're often the backbone of rehabilitating the dogs; without them, the staff would be overwhelmed. "Our volunteers actually did log sheets every day when the animals were being worked with, the improvement, so we could track over time what was happening," Roberts says. "We would never have had the time to do that ourselves."

Upcoming Legislation

Missourians for the Protection of Dogs / YES! on Prop B is leading a citizen-backed ballot initiative, The Puppy Mill Cruelty Prevention Act. Proposition B will be on the November 2010 ballot, allowing the public to vote the measure into law. The measure is designed to improve the lives of dogs in commercial breeding operations in Missouri.

Do You Know My History?

The journey of puppy mill dogs through a shelter doesn't end there—the whole point of taking in the dogs in the first place is to find them homes! Staff and volunteers promote the arrival of the dogs, screen potential adopters, and find homes where the dogs will have the best chance of success. The good news is that while they're often fearful, rescued puppy mill dogs are rarely aggressive, and the majority do get used to being cuddled and cared for in a home environment. Many will also benefit from having another dog in the home for company.

To let its community know that puppy mill dogs will soon be available for adoption, the Oregon Humane Society sends out a press release about the dogs. The shelter also tries to target people who would likely be a good match, such as those who already have dogs of the same breed. Then the staff compiles written information highlighting the special needs of the dogs. "We put together a cheat sheet: 'This is what the challenges are, this is what the rewards can be, this is probably the best environment,'" Roberts says. "... Some of these dogs can't go to homes with toddlers, because they would just be terrified, or very active homes—you know, chaos."

When the SPCA of Tampa Bay plans an adoption event for a large number of puppy mill dogs, the shelter gets them ready for adoption, and then tells the community that these special pets are available—but that they do come with challenges. Some adopted dogs become their adopters' little shadows, never wanting to be apart, and they can suffer from separation anxiety. Still others have never bonded with people at all, and "when you



Puppy mill dogs can bring a blitz of great publicity for shelters that receive them. A volunteer (center) and Suzy Swims, director of operations at the Norfolk SPCA, show off two puppy mill dogs to the media as they leave the shelter for their new homes.

have a dog that doesn't give you any affection once you get it home, and you couldn't wait to get it, that can be disappointing for some people," Brooks says. "They adopted a pet to have a best friend, and some of them don't realize the challenges that come with these guys."

But when the word spreads that puppy mill dogs are ready for adoption, there's rarely a lack of interest. In fact, it's often terrific publicity for shelters. "It brings people in, and we've seen our adoption rates for our cats and larger dogs go up, because we have so many people coming in to look for these dogs," Swims says. "We've at times had a line of people wrapped around the building."

The Humane Society of Missouri has pre-adoption events, when the training and behavior department gives presentations for prospective owners, going over all the issues (timidity, potty training, long-term medical problems) that owners may not realize are involved. They're sent home with packets of information about puppy mill dogs, and the

staff can refer them to a local behaviorist and training clubs that offer classes for shy dogs. "I really have tried to put together as good a support staff as possible, because we owe it to these people, when we put these dogs into their homes, not to just leave them with no resources," Campbell says.

With the right support, Barnes has seen some dogs who were deeply affected by their suffering in puppy mills go on to make tremendous strides. One particular dog, who came from one of the SPCA of Texas' first puppy mill seizures, sticks out in her mind—a pointer mix the staff named Eeyore.

"It was probably like five or six years ago, and he was found at the back of the property, in a dog run that you couldn't even see, because the grass was so high. He had no hair, and he weighed about 25 pounds, and he should weigh about 60. And we actually didn't think he was going to live, let alone turn his behavior around," she says. The staff worked with him, and an employee ended up adopting him. Today, Barnes says, he looks like the perfect pointer. "You

would never know what he went through," she says.

"And I also think that there's a bond between the owner and the animal when they adopt a puppy mill dog. I don't want to sound all cheesy, but I think that dog knows that the adopter is doing something special."

When a shelter agrees to take in and rehabilitate a group of puppy mill dogs, the staff and volunteers have their work cut out for them. They'll likely experience frustration, heartbreak, and exhaustion. But the difficult process can also yield extraordinary rewards.

"To see them when they get their first bath or the first time they touch the grass ... We put them in big groups outside to play, and it's amazing to watch them," Swims says, choking up. "It's like their spirit hasn't been broken." 

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