



Pandemic creates urgency to pass Pet Safety and Protection Act

FEB 18, 2022

9:00 PM

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Two years into the coronavirus pandemic, many of us struggle daily to try to find silver linings in the dramatic changes and incomprehensible loss brought by COVID-19.

Early in the pandemic, animal lovers found temporary solace knowing that so many Americans had turned to adopting pets for comfort and companionship during times of isolation. In fact, pet ownership has reached an all-time high, with more than 70% of U.S. households now having at least one pet.

But as the pandemic has worn on, those once empty animal shelters began to refill. Media reports began circulating that many pet owners abandoned their new companions at alarming rates as people returned to work and other obligations.

Unfortunately, many deserted pets may not end up in forever homes or even back in shelters. Without the proper government safeguards, they can fall into the hands of nefarious opportunists who obtain “random source” dogs and cats, only to sell them to research facilities. These bad-acting middlemen can even steal family pets or prey on unsuspecting pet owners who place ads on Craigslist or apps like Nextdoor. And there’s

usually not a happy ending.

Sadly, there is currently no permanent law to curb this practice or to stop so-called “Class B” dealers from getting U.S. Department of Agriculture licenses and profiteering off once-owned dogs and cats. The best hope for pets and their owners is the bipartisan Pet Safety and Protection Act, sponsored by Congressmen Mike Doyle, D-Pa., and Chris Smith, R-N.J.

Last Chance for Animals, the organization I founded in 1984, got involved in this issue in 1988 after a frantic phone call from a woman named “Jane,” who had given away her dog to a man who answered a “Free to a Good Home” ad she placed in a local newspaper. Alarm bells went off after Jane realized the man had lied about his phone number, and she called LCA. Through old-fashioned detective work, I realized the same man had taken dogs and cats from several similar ads.

LCA tracked down the man and identified him as Frederick Spero. Spero was working with his then-girlfriend, animal dealer Barbara Ruggerio, and accomplice Ralph Jacobsen, to round up dogs and cats from multiple “random sources” and sell them to facilities using animals for research.

The trio were convicted of felony grand theft of dogs and conspiracy. This marked the first successful felony prosecution in U.S. history for stealing pets to sell to research laboratories.

Although LCA was able to reunite some companion animals with their owners, many dogs and cats had already been killed in experiments. For some pet owners who unknowingly gave their beloved companions away to this fate, it still haunts them.

Time and again, LCA has exposed the cruelty of corrupt random-source Class B dealers, including an undercover investigation into the largest animal trafficker in America that was chronicled in the 2004 Emmy-award winning HBO documentary, “Dealing Dogs.” The investigation exposed elaborate pet theft rings, sick and dying dogs housed in kennels, and falsified animal origin documents supplied to laboratories.

This issue has been studied extensively by a host of government agencies and the National Research Council, which found that it is not necessary to obtain animals from Class B

dealers for National Institutes of Health-funded research. Further, USDA has stated that it cannot guarantee dogs and cats used in research experiments are legally acquired, while spending incredible amounts of taxpayer money each year unsuccessfully trying to regulate Class B dealers.

The Pet Safety and Protection Act has been introduced in every Congress since 1995, with little to no opposition. Despite the horror stories and unassailable facts around Class B dealers, however, it has failed to pass.

Thankfully, a provision has been included in the annual Agricultural Appropriations Acts since 2016 temporarily putting the Class B dealers that sell to labs out of business. For now, any Class B dealers who supply random-sourced animals to research facilities cannot renew their license after expiry.

However, this is not a permanent solution. If the current language were to be removed in a future spending bill, this cruel industry could quickly be revived. This is particularly concerning at a time when Class B dealers have increasing access to unwanted pets.

These band-aid fixes aren't good enough. House and Senate Agriculture Committees should hold a hearing on this bill and shepherd it through both chambers — as a standalone bill or as part of the Farm Bill reauthorization — this year.

The Pet Safety and Protection Act is too important, especially now, to die during another Congress.

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First Published February 18, 2022, 9:00pm