



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

In the Back Room: Undercover in a New York City Puppy Store

An undercover investigator with The Humane Society of the United States finds “back room” at chic Manhattan pet store filled with sick puppies; puppies delivered en masse from known puppy mill states; buyers misled about puppies’ health.



An English bulldog was one of many puppies who suffered from upper respiratory symptoms for days before being taken to a veterinarian, who diagnosed her with pneumonia. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

Puppies with wounds, high fevers, respiratory distress and seizures. Employees who swatted at the puppies, lifted them by their necks, yelled at them or shook them. A store owner who told employees to give sick and feverish puppies a cold bath, human cough syrup or an aspirin, rather than immediately taking them to a veterinarian. These are just a few of the heartbreaking scenes an undercover investigator with The Humane Society of

the United States witnessed while she worked for two months at a high-end puppy store in Manhattan.



The Chelsea Kennel Club storefront as seen from the street.
Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

From April 21, 2017 to June 27, 2017, an HSUS investigator worked undercover as a pet shop assistant at a “boutique” style puppy store called Chelsea Kennel Club, where some puppies were priced at over \$4,000. What she found was inexcusable. A back “isolation” room, which customers did not have access to, was filled with sick puppies, and when it was at

capacity, sick puppies were moved to the sales floor. Customers who purchased the puppies while they were still coughing or sneezing were then told their puppies just had “a little cold,” and veterinary records provided with the puppies often did not contain full medical disclosures.

Consumers who purchased puppies with congenital defects were sometimes not given information about the known defects. Puppies who should have gone directly to a veterinarian for issues such as high fevers, persistent diarrhea, open wounds, severe conjunctivitis or persistent upper respiratory infections instead were treated by sales staff in the back room, often with expired or inappropriate medications. As if the health problems weren’t enough stress for the puppies, the investigator witnessed a few impatient employees smack at puppies, pick them up by the scruff, yell at them or forcibly hold them down while the puppies cringed and sometimes cried out in fear.

Undercover video shows a shocking lack of concern by the store’s proprietor. Staff routinely dosed puppies themselves, at the store owner’s direction, with a stockpile of medications kept in a back room—including some drugs labeled for



A Pomeranian puppy suffered from what appeared to be a very painful eye infection for several days before being taken to a veterinarian. The store’s owner tried to treat the puppy with medications on hand, allowing the condition to worsen and causing unnecessary suffering. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

humans, birds or cattle. The store owner often sent medications that did not appear to be specifically prescribed by the store's veterinarian home with consumers when they purchased sick puppies. Dogs who were visibly ill often suffered for days or even weeks before being taken to a veterinarian – and while they were sick, they could make other puppies in the store sick, too.

During the investigation, The HSUS reached out to local authorities about a number of inhumane and possibly illegal practices the investigator witnessed. The HSUS is continuing to work with law enforcement to share footage and documentation.

Sick puppies sold to secret shoppers

The pet store that our undercover investigator was employed with was selected at random based on available employment opportunities. But coincidentally, it was the same store that an HSUS employee visited with *Inside Edition* in December 2016 as part of the newsmagazine's investigation into dog DNA tests. The story, which aired in April 2017, found that the puppy they purchased from Chelsea Kennel Club, now named Jak, was not the breed listed on his paperwork. Jak was sold as a purebred Coton de Tulear, but two DNA tests showed he was really a mix of two other breeds. Immediately after *Inside Edition* purchased Jak, he went home with an HSUS puppy mills campaign staff member while the show was in production. Jak became noticeably ill the day after he was purchased. Over the course of several weeks, he had frequent coughing, bloody diarrhea and vomiting, and



Above: A customer [note: not our secret shopper] plays with a sick puppy in the store. She said she noticed the puppy was sniffing. **Below:** The same puppy with mucus coming from his nose. Store personnel knew he was sick but sold him anyway. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.



had to be treated for kennel cough, Giardia, colitis and other issues, for a total of almost \$1,000 in veterinary bills.

Jak's foster family restored him to good health and found him a permanent home. But after the experience with Jak, and after receiving information from the undercover investigator that the store was not fully disclosing abnormalities to consumers, The HSUS sent two new 'secret shoppers' to the store on May 21, 2017. The secret shoppers purchased two puppies with known problems from Chelsea Kennel Club to see if the pet store staff would disclose the problems to buyers¹.

One of the puppies purchased by HSUS secret shoppers was a female shiba inu whom our investigator noted had been ill in the store for weeks, sick with upper respiratory symptoms. The staff had been giving the puppy drugs based on her symptoms. The puppy, now named Gertie, had just been put back out on the sales floor, even though she was still coughing. Medical records provided with the puppy when she was sold showed the store's veterinarian had spayed her on April 26—almost a month before the purchase-- but there were no medical records provided to show she had ever been treated by a veterinarian for her respiratory illness, and there were no medications provided with her when she was sold. Our investigator noted that Gertie (called Bella in the store) had instead been medicated with whichever drugs the pet store management chose to try on her, even as her illness persisted.

As our secret shopper purchased Gertie, the undercover employee filmed the transaction with a hidden camera, documenting as pet store staff told the buyer that Gertie just had "a bit of a cough" which one staffer said was "typical around this time of year when the weather changes." Two different staff members said the puppy would be sent home with medication. Gertie was not sent home with any medication. She coughed repeatedly all the way home. Our secret shopper, who became Gertie's foster caretaker, took Gertie to her veterinarian the next morning, where she was diagnosed with bronchitis and prescribed new medication. When her bronchitis did not improve despite the treatment, Gertie's new veterinarian did an x-ray and diagnosed pneumonia. When an HSUS employee called the store about Gertie's diagnosis, the store's owner offered to reimburse her for some of the veterinary bills, as is typically required under [New York City law](#) and [New York State's puppy lemon law](#). The employee who answered the phone claimed Gertie had just started to get sick the day she was purchased, even though the investigator had observed that staff were aware of her illness for weeks. Gertie's pneumonia has cleared up now, but her new veterinarian believes she may have permanent lung scarring due to her illness.

The second dog purchased by our secret shoppers was a Chihuahua puppy named Rhonda. Rhonda had been in the store for months, had known temperament issues and sometimes

¹ While The HSUS does not recommend purchasing puppies as pets from pet stores, we determined for the purpose of the investigation that the purchases were a necessary part of the research process.

growled at the staff, according to our investigator's log notes. Rhonda had been previously sold and returned to the store for reportedly biting her new owner twice and drawing blood, according to statements our investigator filmed in the store. However, instead of being sent to a rescue group and provided with much-needed behavioral treatment, Rhonda was put back on the sales floor with a \$950 price tag. When our secret shopper purchased her, no one at CKC told her about Rhonda's bite history. The sales staff only mentioned that Rhonda is not good with children. In addition, there was no information in Rhonda's file about her congenital eye disorder, which causes one of her eyes to appear smaller than the other. Rhonda's paperwork shows that she came from a property, R Family Kennel, LLC, that has the same address as a puppy mill in Seneca, Kansas, that has appeared in one of The HSUS' prior Horrible Hundred reports, which documents problem puppy mills across the country.

Both Rhonda and Gertie are now in caring homes where they will continue to be treated for their medical and behavioral issues. But their stories are not unique. The undercover investigator saw many other sick puppies, and puppies with congenital issues, being sold without full disclosure to buyers. The investigator filmed several of the buyers as they later returned to the store to report that their puppies had been diagnosed with a range of illnesses, often including kennel cough, pneumonia and Giardia and other parasites. While the store did reimburse for some of the veterinary bills, which is required by [New York state law under certain circumstances](#), they did not reimburse buyers whose puppies had bloody diarrhea or parasites, repeatedly telling buyers that it is normal for puppies to have parasites.

[New York state](#) law requires "no pet dealer shall knowingly sell any animal that has a diagnosed congenital condition or contagious disease that adversely affects the health of the animal, without first informing the consumer, in writing, of such a condition." Yet the investigator witnessed several instances in which pet store workers removed the paperwork showing a congenital or health problem from a puppy's medical folder before the folder was given to the puppy's buyer.



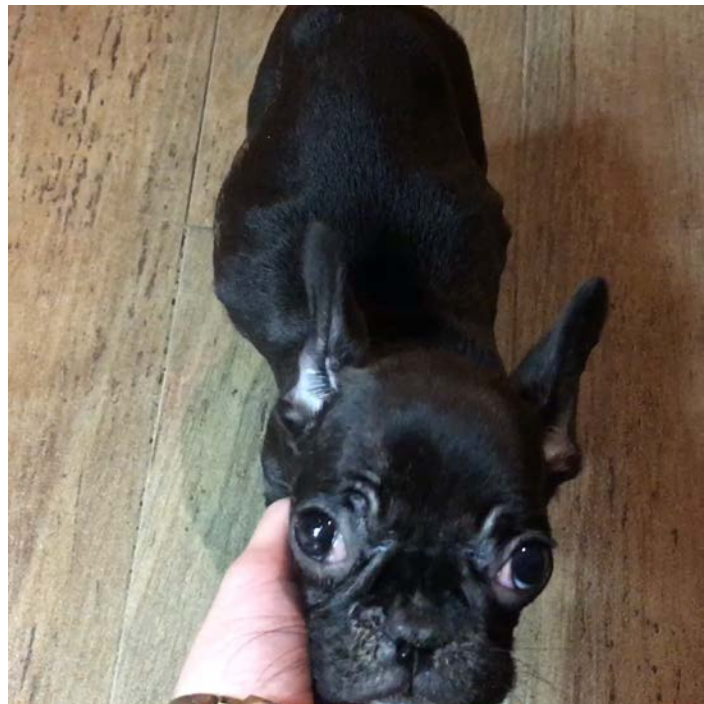
An emaciated French bulldog was diagnosed with pneumonia, after waiting days to be taken to a veterinarian. The puppy lost a significant amount of weight. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

Inadequate veterinary care

In addition to CKC's failure to disclose illnesses to consumers, our investigator also found that many of the puppies were receiving shockingly improper care. One Chihuahua puppy had a 104.4 degree fever (a high normal temperature for a puppy is 102.5), but when the undercover investigator confronted the pet store owner about her problem, instead of taking the dog to the vet, the store owner instructed her to give the dog aspirin and a cold bath. According to the Federal Drug Administration and the American Veterinary Medical Association, human drugs should never be given to dogs unless directed by a veterinarian, and aspirin is listed on the AVMA's website as a drug that [can be toxic](#) to pets.

At other times, the investigator observed the store owner directing staff to give puppies human cough syrup, or to give an antibiotic to every puppy in the store, even though some of the puppies were already taking two or three other drugs. Puppies often vomited after receiving so many drugs, and it appeared that the pet store's contracted veterinarian was not informed of all the medications being dispensed. More than once, our investigator witnessed pet store staff performing a web search to determine the dosage for the drugs they were dispensing.

Some of the very sick puppies who were not taken to a veterinarian in a timely manner included an emaciated black French bulldog whose ribs and spine were visible, a Pomeranian whose eyes were so badly infected that they were swollen shut, and a toy Australian shepherd and an English bulldog puppy who were kept in a back room for weeks because they were coughing and were not getting better. When the latter two dogs were finally taken to a veterinarian, both of the dogs were diagnosed with pneumonia. The Pomeranian was finally diagnosed and treated by the store's veterinarian for conjunctivitis, but only after she had suffered for days in the store's back room in apparent pain and without proper treatment. Our investigator went directly to the store owner during this time and asked if she could take the puppy to a veterinarian, but the store owner said she would wait.



An emaciated French bulldog was diagnosed with pneumonia, after waiting days to be taken to a veterinarian. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

The investigator documented that the store's contracted veterinarian did drop by every week. Staff often told consumers this fact to ease their worries about puppies who were coughing or sneezing. But our investigator's video documents that the vet's examinations often lasted less than one minute per puppy, and usually did not even involve taking their temperatures. Often the veterinarian only examined the new arrivals and gave rabies vaccines to a few of the dogs—even though sales staff told potential buyers (as documented by undercover video) that he checked all of the puppies. When the veterinarian did recommend drug treatment, staff did not always follow his recommendations, or substituted other drugs at the direction of the store's owner.

Delivered by trucks from Missouri and Iowa; Links to "Horrible Hundred" dealers

While many of the puppies became sick in the store, sometimes they arrived in poor health. Our undercover investigator witnessed truckloads of puppies being delivered to the store from known puppy mill states, primarily Missouri and Iowa, from transporters with links to puppy mills. One of the transporters that repeatedly delivered puppies to CKC is RDR Transport from Missouri, which was listed in The HSUS' [2017 Horrible Hundred report](#) after [53 puppies](#) died in their care last year due to being left on a hot truck. Another transporter that delivered puppies to the store was Hakuna Matata Transport, a licensed USDA carrier that is located in New Sharon, Iowa, another top puppy mill state. Hakuna Matata is owned by Debra Pratt. Pratt was the former owner of a puppy mill in Iowa that was one of the most notorious in the state. Pratt's puppy mill was finally shut down in 2013 after the state revoked its license for three years due to repeated, severe animal welfare violations; the state also fined Pratt \$7,200. Pratt was previously listed in one of The HSUS' Horrible Hundred reports. And a licensed USDA breeder that provided puppies to the store, Hooves n Paws of Huntsville, Missouri, shares the same address as yet another former Horrible Hundred puppy mill, owned by Brandi Cheney/ Circle B Farms, LLC. Cheney once owned a puppy mill in concert with Diana Stephenson called S & S Family Puppies. That puppy mill was ordered to be [shut down in Missouri](#) in 2011 due to a long history of animal welfare issues, although Stephenson was recently [accused of continuing to sell to pet stores](#). Cheney and Stephenson were sued multiple times by consumers for the sale of sick and dying puppies.

RDR and some of the other transporters that deliver to CKC also deliver to CitiPups and a number of other puppy stores in the New York City area, according to conversations the investigator had with the transport drivers.

Two of the puppies delivered to CKC during the investigation, a pug and a French bulldog, arrived with ghastly wounds. They both had what appeared to be surgical sites in the naval area, possibly due to hernia repairs that had been performed before the puppies were shipped to the store. One of the surgical sites had opened up and the puppy had a gaping wound on the abdomen. The other puppy had a puffy, swollen surgical site that appeared to be badly infected. When these injuries were found in the store, the owner

was notified, but she did not direct staff to rush the animals to the veterinarian. Instead, they were treated with ointments the store had on hand and not seen by a vet until a day or more after their arrival.

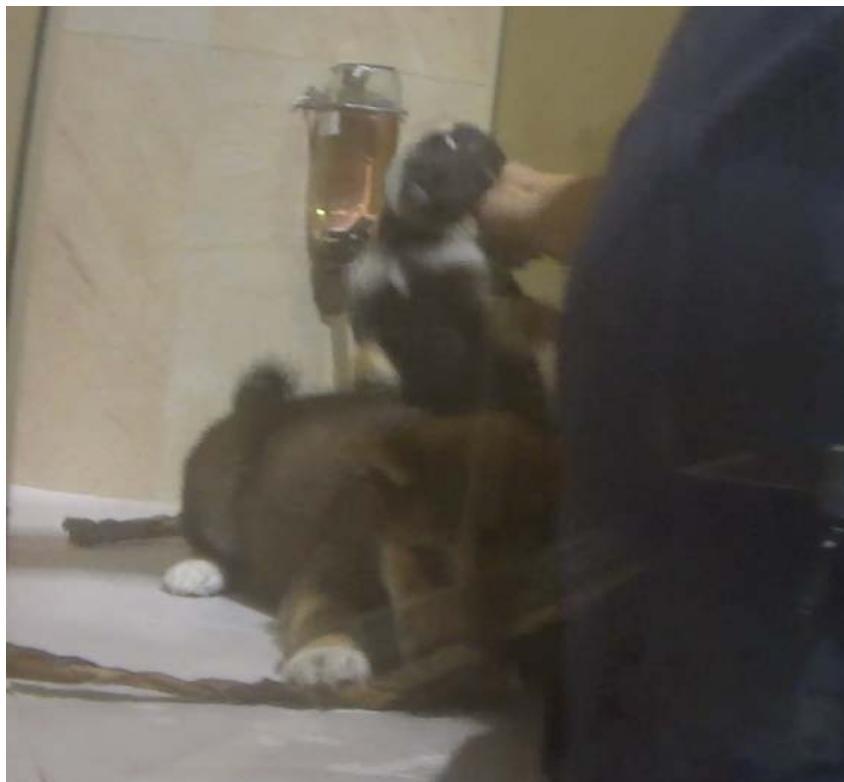
The fact that at least two puppies were sent to the store in such condition, with no apparent explanation for their large wounds, speaks volumes about the kind of breeders the store is buying dogs from. And the fact that their injuries weren't noticed during transport indicates a systemic pattern that goes beyond the one store we investigated; puppies from the same sources were delivered by the same transporters to other stores on their route.

Another issue the investigator noted was that the store sometimes appeared to be circumventing a [2015 New York City law](#) that prohibits pet stores from knowingly buying from "B

dealers," which are middleman brokers that re-sell dogs bred by others. For instance, a female Shih Tzu puppy who had the name of a B dealer on her ID collar when she arrived was listed as coming from an "A breeder" on paperwork that was provided to the buyer. The investigator also witnessed a conversation in which the store owner was told to write a check to someone who was reportedly a broker, instead of the Class A breeder who was listed on the dog's paperwork.

"Smacking them around"

As if all the medical issues weren't enough cause for concern, the investigator also witnessed at least three of the store's employees being unnecessarily harsh with the puppies. When she first started her employment, other staff told the investigator that one employee in particular, whom we will call G, was known to get angry and "smack the puppies around." The employees stated that all the puppies were afraid of G.



An employee called "G" grabbed a puppy by the neck and threw her against the back of the cage. Photo credit: The HSUS, 2017.

The investigator did not notice this behavior in G at first. But a few weeks into her employment, the investigator recorded G smacking at cages or even at the puppies themselves with a cleaning rag when she became irritated. G was also rough when medicating the animals, sometimes picking them up by the neck and dragging them out of the cage that way.



An employee called "L" said he was teaching a puppy "dominance" by forcibly holding him down and holding his muzzle closed; several of the store's employees used this inhumane technique. Photo credit, The HSUS, 2017.

G also held some of the puppies down and clamped her fingers around the puppies' muzzles as punishment for barking or whining. She even grabbed one puppy by the neck and tossed it to the back of the cage, and then hit the dog on the nose with a chew toy, apparently because she felt the puppy wasn't playing nicely with another puppy in the cage. None of these incidents seemed to physically injure the puppies, but the puppies were terrified and sometimes covered when G approached them.

In addition, at least two other pet store employees, A and L, put puppies "in their place" when they barked or fussed too much by forcing them onto their backs, holding them down and holding their muzzles shut. One puppy when treated this way was so terrified that he was screaming. The employee, L, explained to the undercover investigator that he was teaching them "dominance," a technique that other staff seemed to agree with even though it only terrified the puppies.

Authorities notified during investigation

The HSUS was so concerned about the safety of the puppies at Chelsea Kennel Club that we reached out to New York's Mayor's office and office of the state Attorney General about potential violations of the law during the investigation. Both offices agreed to look into the documentation, which includes many hours of video and 146 pages of daily log notes. The HSUS will continue to urge authorities to apply the toughest charges and penalties possible if the pet store is found in violation of state or local laws.

Not the only bad apple

Undercover video shows a shocking lack of regard for the welfare of puppies at Chelsea Kennel Club, but information compiled by The HSUS, including complaints from former employees who worked at other puppy stores and hundreds of complaints from puppy buyers across the country, indicates that the store's practices and the medical conditions of dogs sold in pet stores are not uncommon. Whenever puppies are sold as a commodity, the motive to make a profit often means skimping on expensive but necessary veterinary care.

The HSUS has long cautioned the public against purchasing puppies from pet stores. Not only are pet store puppies sourced almost exclusively from puppy mills, where disease can run rampant, but their treatment in the retail pipeline is far from ideal. Many of the puppies sold in pet stores are sick because they were raised in unsanitary conditions at puppy mills, while others become ill in transit or at the store due to inappropriate disease control measures and the priority of cost-cutting over professional veterinary diagnosis and treatment.

Pet store employees have blown the whistle before on the shockingly poor care that puppies receive in retail stores. Former pet store / kennel employees have spoken out about similar experiences in [Massachusetts](#), [Florida](#), [Tennessee](#) and [Ohio](#), to name a few. Heartbroken families have shared their stories of sick pet store puppies in [Missouri](#), [New Jersey](#), [Chicago](#), [Virginia](#) and many other parts of the country. The HSUS has assisted with consumer lawsuits and complaints regarding sick pet store puppies and/or online puppy sales in [Arizona](#), [Illinois](#), [Florida](#) and [New York](#), and assisted with [a cruelty case against a pet store owner in New Jersey](#) in 2011; at least two [similar cases](#) in New Jersey [made the news](#) in 2016. The HSUS' investigations of pet stores in [New York](#), [Maryland](#), [Virginia](#), [New Jersey](#) and other areas have exposed the fact that most pet store puppies come from unhealthy conditions at puppy mills and the puppies are often sick.

The HSUS encourages the public to take an active role in stopping puppy mills and pet store abuse by refusing to ever buy a puppy from a pet store or online sight-unseen. Families who want a puppy should first visit an animal shelter or reputable rescue group, or buy only from a [responsible breeder](#) they have met in person.

Families who have purchased a sick puppy can submit a complaint to The HSUS online at humanesociety.org/puppycomplaint. Those in New York State can also fill out a complaint form with the New York [Attorney General's office](#).

The HSUS will work with authorities to encourage a full investigation of any potential violations. The HSUS also encourages New York state to ban the sale of puppies in pet stores, as investigations prove that laws intended to ensure the health and safety of puppies in pet stores do not go far enough to protect dogs and consumers.