

State to help consumers sniff out puppy mill pets

Law would require stores to post certain information

By Lisa Black
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Pet buyers are closer to learning not only how much that doggy in the window costs, but whether it came from a large-scale "puppy mill" and has a history of health problems, according to a bill approved by the Illinois Senate.

Pet stores would have to post information outside each dog and cat's cage that allows consumers to conduct further research. And buyers might think twice if they learn the animal comes from an out-of-state breeder or large facility, where animals may be housed in small wire cages with minimal exercise, said Jordan Matyas, Illinois director for the Humane Society of the United States.

If signed by Gov. Pat Quinn, the law would take effect Jan. 1.

The legislation comes on the heels of a scathing report released last week that takes U.S. animal welfare inspectors to task for failing to stop dog breeders who have repeatedly violated laws that protect animals from abuse.

The inspector general for the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that the agency responsible for investigating so-called puppy mills underreported violations, failed to enforce the federal Animal Welfare Act and even lowered penalties for some repeat offenders.

"It's just heartbreaking," U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said, describing his disgust with photos of animal abuse contained in the 69-page report.

More than half of 4,250 dog breeding facilities that were reinspected after violating the law were still ignoring minimum care standards, according to the inspector general's audit, conducted over three years.

Inspectors relied on educating repeat offenders, without an "appropriate level of enforcement" that weakened its effectiveness, the report states.

Other large-scale breeders have circumvented the law by selling animals over the Internet, a loophole that Durbin vowed to close with legislation that will require any breeder who sells more than 50 dogs a year to be licensed and subject to inspections.

The audit focused on the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Animal Care Unit, a division of the USDA.

Durbin said USDA officials agreed with the report's findings and agreed to work on training its inspectors and shifting resources to improve enforcement, Durbin said. "There was no push back, no denial," he said.

He said he has contacted the Humane Society, veterinarians and breeders about suggested improvements in the process.

"The breeders were not prepared to join us at this point," Durbin said. "I hope this APHIS report will convince them there are some terribly bad actors out there who are abusive of these animals."

In Illinois, the legislation would require



U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, left, and Christine Mallul play with a puppy before a news conference Friday at Paws Chicago. TERENCE ANTONIO JAMES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

pet shops to post information on or near the cages of dogs and cats that includes: the name and address of each animal's breeder; a record of all veterinary conditions and treatments; and any known information regarding congenital or hereditary defects of the animals' parents. The Senate passed the measure last week; it had been approved earlier in the House.

"This is not the final answer," Matyas said, adding that pet buyers should ask questions about how the animal was raised.

Jennifer Cantoral, of Plainfield, is among those who support any new crackdown on puppy mills.

She said an employee told her that the

miniature poodle she purchased last September for \$1,200 from a Naperville Petland store came from a local breeder. Later, she discovered that the dog, Ralphie, came from a USDA-licensed facility in Loogootee, Ind.

The veterinarian who contracts with Petland deemed the dog healthy during an exam within the first week, according to Petland. But Cantoral said the dog was diagnosed 45 days later with kennel cough, which turned into pneumonia.

"My dog is still sick," said Cantoral, who was told the animal possibly has an immune disorder. "Something definitely needs to be done."

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