Saving Gracie

how one dog escaped the shadowy world of american puppy mills

Carol Bradley

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"Check Out That Place"

IT STARTED WITH a tip. On the afternoon of February 6, 2006, a woman phoned the Chester County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in Pennsylvania to report problems at a kennel in Lower Oxford, a small community twenty-three miles away. She had visited the kennel in hopes of buying a puppy, the caller said. To her horror, the breeder had emerged with a young dog covered in dried feces and stale urine. The puppy reeked, and the breeder didn't even seem to notice.

Something about the kennel wasn't right, the woman said. It was unsanitary and smelled atrocious. In a back room, she could hear lots of dogs barking. She declined the puppy, made some excuses, drove away, and promptly phoned the SPCA. "You guys need to check out that place," she told the receptionist. If the breeder tried to sell her a filthy puppy, there was no telling what shape the rest of his dogs were in.

The caller didn't leave her name, but she did have the name of the kennel: Mike-Mar. The name of the breeder was Michael Wolf.

The SPCA assigned the case to Cheryl Shaw, one of its humane society police officers. Shaw had inspected the kennel once, years ago, and hadn't found anything. But this complaint definitely needed to be pursued.

She discussed the case with her supervisor, Becky Turnbull, and then phoned the state dog warden for Chester County, Maureen Siddons. Siddons agreed to accompany Shaw on an unannounced visit to Wolf's compound.

Mike-Mar Kennel was located at 1746 Baltimore Pike, in a dip off a two-lane highway between Lincoln University and the Strike 'N Spare bowling alley. The property was protected by a row of bushes and trees so thick that the driveway was nearly invisible. Anyone who wasn't looking for it carefully might miss it entirely. A breeding operation with lots of dogs to sell presumably would want to call attention to its wares, but there was no sign advertising Mike-Mar—no indication that beyond the foliage was a flourishing business.

Past the shrubbery, the driveway widened into the shape of an L, an area big enough to accommodate several vehicles. On the afternoon of February 8, Shaw and Siddons pulled in, parked their car and immediately saw Wolf on the porch of a house on the right side of the property. They were curious to see how he would react to their arrival. Wolf wasn't required to allow Siddons onto his property without a warrant. Since he was no longer licensed by the state to breed dogs, he could argue that there was no kennel to inspect. He could have told both women to take a hike, and they would have had no choice but to do so.

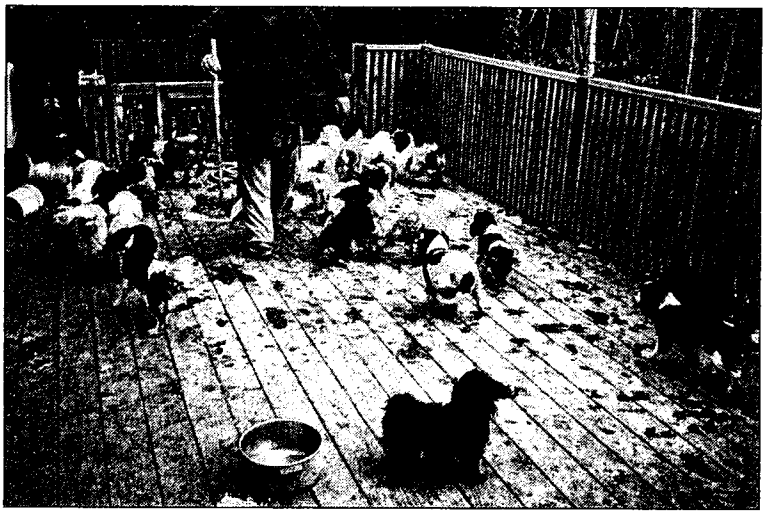
Instead, Wolf came forward and, to their surprise, greeted them cordially. When Siddons explained why they were there—"We want to see the dogs," she told him—he agreed to let them in.

Wolf knew Siddons. She'd inspected his kennel many times before. If he recognized Shaw, he didn't say so. But nothing about her seemed threatening. The brown-haired mother of two had a self-effacing, easygoing manner about her.

Right away, Wolf acted sheepish. He knew he had too many dogs, he said. He asked Shaw and Siddons to wait a moment and then he stepped inside the kennel.

Outside in the cold, Shaw stood with a clipboard in one hand and the other hand plunged inside a pocket of her fleece-lined jacket. She glanced about. In the middle of the property, several dozen yards to the rear of Wolf's house, was the kennel building. To the left of it sat a modular structure that appeared to be a second home. It had decks on the front and back. All three buildings were surrounded by a solidly built wooden fence, inside of which Shaw could see dogs trotting about. More dogs were in the side yard. Still more paced about in front of the modular home.

Minutes later, Wolf reappeared. He invited the inspectors inside the kennel. Shaw and Siddons stepped from bright sunlight into a dimly lit front room that smelled rank and felt like a furnace. The



Michael Wolf, in the center with a pole in his hand, makes his way across a deck covered with feces as a couple dozen of his dogs mill about.

Cavalier King Charles Spaniels stared silently from inside filthy crates at Michael Wolf's kennel in southeastern Pennsylvania.

temperature outside was 33 degrees Fahrenheit, but inside it had to be 80 degrees, Shaw thought.

Squinting her eyes, she could make out cages lining the walls in two rooms. The crates were stacked atop one another, three and four rows high, and they were full of dogs. Feces and urine littered the sides of the cages as well as the floor, and soiled newspaper overflowed from industrial-size garbage cans. Shaw could distinguish Havanese, English Bulldogs, and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, dozens of them, crammed five and six to a crate the size of a large television set. She was horrified, but kept her mouth shut.

From there, Wolf led the officers to his residence. There, too, crates stacked with dogs lined the perimeter of what should have been the living room, dining room, and kitchen. In one corner was a playpen filled with puppies.

The noise was deafening. Dogs barked constantly—hoarse, raspy yelps. Excited by the visitors, the animals rushed to the front of their cages, only to cringe with anxiety as Shaw and Siddons approached. "Hi, puppy puppy puppy," Shaw called out, but she was standing too close. The dogs refused to come forward. The very presence of human beings unnerved them.

As bad as the noise was, the smell was worse. It was a festering odor, a bottomless stink that permeated the inspectors' clothes and hair and stung their eyes. Wolf seemed oblivious to it. He walked the inspectors through the rooms, with Siddons following behind him and Shaw bringing up the rear. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The cages were lined with paper soggy with waste, and they were so cramped the dogs barely had room to turn around. Bowls of food sat in one corner alongside slimy water bowls, many of which were empty. The animals' coats were stained with excrement.

Shaw had spent years doing criminal welfare work on behalf of animals. She thought she'd encountered every possible form of abuse. But she'd never seen this many suffering dogs in one place.

She peered inside the crates. Dozens of frightened eyes stared back. "I can't leave these guys here," she blurted out. Wolf was only a few feet ahead of her, but if he heard her, he didn't act like it. Minutes later, Shaw pulled out her camera and announced, "I'm taking pictures." Wolf turned to her and wanted to know why. She told him she needed to document the rooms for her report. To her surprise, he didn't try to stop her.

While Shaw snapped photos, Siddons went from room to room counting the dogs out loud and jotting down a tally. Adding together the number of dogs she saw outside with the puppies in the playpen and the dozens and dozens of dogs confined to crates, she came up with 136 dogs in all. "That's it," Wolf agreed. He knew he was over the limit, he said, but he loved his dogs too much. He had such a hard time letting go of his older breeding dogs that he'd finally stopped trying. He just kept them.

"You've got to lower your numbers," Siddons told him. Wolf didn't argue. The dogs needed to be groomed, Shaw added. "We can do that," Wolf replied. He showed the women how he would sit on his couch with the dogs and clip their nails.

In the warning she wrote up, Shaw focused on the lack of vaccinations: Wolf was unable to produce paperwork proving the dogs

had had their shots. The squalid conditions were more disturbing, but Shaw played down her concern. The last thing she needed was for Wolf to panic and take matters into his own hands once she and Siddons left.

Wolf agreed to set up an appointment with his veterinarian, Tom Stevenson, who operated the Twin Valley Veterinary Clinic in Honey Brook, Pennsylvania. Stevenson's name sounded familiar: Among local animal welfare advocates, he was infamous for being the veterinarian on record for some of the largest puppy mills in the state.

Before leaving, the inspectors got a glimpse of Wolf's two partners. Gordon Trottier, a menacing-looking man with an unkempt beard, appeared briefly during the tour and then left just as quickly. Wolf's other partner, Margaret Hills, a woman in her sixties, was in the kennel building, removing soiled newspaper and putting new paper down. At one point Shaw also spied a young boy she later learned was one of Wolf's sons.

The visit lasted two and a half hours and ended on friendly enough terms. Just before the officers left, Wolf even turned over to them an English Bulldog who was visibly ill. The women crated the dog, put him in the back of the van, said goodbye, and pulled out onto the highway.

Shaw tried to act calm, but her pulse was racing.

She hadn't started out to be a humane society police officer. She'd studied graphic design, but abandoned that idea and instead she underwent officer training in the early 1990s. For several years she worked at an animal shelter in Montgomery County. After that, she juggled a couple of part-time jobs. But she missed helping needy dogs and cats. Animal work was what she'd been put on Earth to do, apparently—she couldn't imagine doing anything else.

So she'd started over, this time one county to the south. In the beginning, she commuted thirty miles from her home in Schwenksville to West Chester on Sundays to handle stray animals. Eventually,

she got promoted to humane society investigations officer. Now 35, she had worked for the SPCA for six years. Her days were filled with grim cases of abuse and neglect—everything from starving and mistreated dogs to cat hoarders to victims of ritual sacrifice. Despite the grim nature of her work, she savored every aspect of it, the happy endings most of all—the days when she could rescue dogs and cats who were helpless to save themselves. The good outweighed the bad. She honestly believed that.

Now, though, she was driving away from the largest case of animal cruelty she'd ever witnessed. If these dogs were to have any chance at better lives, she needed to act fast.

She and Siddons were barely out of the driveway when Shaw pulled out her cell phone and called her supervisor, Turnbull. Quickly, she described the rancid, unhealthy conditions she and Siddons had observed. Filthy dogs were crammed into tiny crates, so many they were hard to count. There was no question what had to be done, as far as Shaw was concerned.

"We can't leave these guys there," she told Turnbull over the phone. She turned to Siddons and asked, "Do you agree with that?"

Yes, Siddons replied, she did.

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Tackling the Puppy Mills

ROBERT O. BAKER understood better than anyone how widespread the hidden world of puppy mills had become.

A former stockbroker from St. Louis, Baker, 59, began chronicling abuses in horse and dog racing and dog theft rings in the late 1970s. He wrote the book *The Misuse of Drugs in Horse Racing.* In 1980, after *60 Minutes* featured his work, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) hired him to look into puppy mills.

His assignment was straightforward: Find out whether the federal Animal Welfare Act was making any headway in improving conditions at commercial kennels. The U.S. Congress had passed the law in 1966 and expanded it four years later to establish minimal standards for the care, housing, sale, and transport of dogs, cats, and other animals held by dealers or laboratories. Large-scale breeding kennels were now required to be licensed, and federal inspectors were supposed to inspect the kennels once a year. But the HSUS kept hearing anecdotal evidence that, ten years after taking

effect, the law wasn't making much of a difference. Dogs were still being inadequately housed, poorly bred dogs were still winding up in pet stores, and customers were still being victimized.

Baker got a job selling kennel supplies and equipment to brokers and breeders, which provided a crash course in the how-to's of large-scale dog breeding. From time to time he also approached kennel operators on the pretext of buying a dog. Breeders weren't always fooled; in Missouri, he was shot at by a kennel owner who discovered him on her property with a television camera crew. But most breeders had no problem letting him view their operations up close.

He quickly discovered that far from being hampered by the Animal Welfare Act, puppy mills were flourishing. Breeders routinely flouted the law's minimum standards. In kennel after kennel—sometimes old chicken coops—he saw dogs confined to cages so small they could barely turn around, visibly hungry, and diseased. Pennsylvania's farmers didn't have chicken coops, so they housed their dogs in old washing machines and refrigerators or tied them to oil drums or abandoned cars, unprotected from the elements.

The lengths to which breeders were allowed to skirt already lenient regulations astounded Baker. For example, even though excrement was supposed to be removed regularly from a dog's cage, federal inspectors were told not to issue a citation unless the fecal buildup was more than two weeks old. Inspectors typically let matters go three to four weeks before they cited a breeder. And left on their own, breeders tended to let the excrement build up even longer. Not until piles of fecal matter rose so high off the ground that they brushed the wire bottoms of the rabbit hutch-style cages was anything done, and then breeders remedied the problem by simply moving the hutches. It wasn't unusual to see heaps of excrement dotting area farms; the heaps were never removed.

Worn-out dogs were killed and thrown away like garbage. In Missouri, Baker stumbled onto a kennel owner in a back field who was shooting to death about thirty American Eskimo Dogs and

Samoyeds. The breeds weren't as popular as they'd once been, and they'd stopped selling. Baker identified himself as a supplier, so the breeder didn't think to cover up his actions. He assumed Baker would regard the killings the same way he did—business as usual.

Gradually, Baker pieced together the rise of puppy mills: how large-volume commercial dog breeding surfaced in the Midwest after World War II as mom-and-pop pet stores began to give way to corporate franchises; how marketing experts hired by the corporations had concocted an easy way to lure customers by putting adorable puppies in shop windows.

Americans' rising prosperity escalated demand for purebred dogs, and the advent of shopping malls multiplied foot traffic past pet stores. Having a pet shop in a town meant families no longer had to search the want ads or drive out to a farm to examine a litter. At a pet store, they could choose from a variety of breeds, and once they picked out a dog, the supplies they needed—collar and leash, food, toys—were right there, too. Moreover, buyers could charge their purchases on a credit card, something amateur breeders weren't set up to handle. Pet stores made it so easy to acquire a dog that many families found themselves buying one on impulse. Roughly half of the consumers who later complained to the HSUS about buying a sick dog admitted that they had left home that day with no intention of getting a pet.

The AKC registered these pet shop dogs by the tens of thousands. Between the mid-1940s and 1970, the number of registrations jumped from 77,000 a year to 1 million.

To meet the demand, brokers who supplied puppies to the stores needed a steady supply of dogs. They zeroed in on Missouri and Kansas, centrally located states that were home to hundreds of small, isolated farms. Breeding puppies was a boon to Midwestern egg farmers who'd been edged out by large corporations. Farmers could put their empty chicken coops to use by housing dogs in them instead. The U.S. Department of Agriculture encouraged raising puppies as a way for farmers to supplement their income.

In the 1950s, department store chains such as Sears Roebuck and Co. and Montgomery Ward were selling Poodles and Dalmatians alongside tool chests and bicycles, and puppy mills spread into Arkansas, Iowa, and Oklahoma. By the late 1970s, they were migrating east into Pennsylvania, putting them hundreds of miles closer to pet stores along the eastern seaboard. In 1981, a puppy broker from the Midwest held a demonstration in Lancaster County to show Amish and Mennonite farmers how, with little experience or investment, they could raise puppies for profit; several hundred farmers attended the workshop.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, dog brokers and pet stores dealt only with puppies that were registered with the AKC. Amish and Mennonite farmers didn't understand how to fill out the AKC's paperwork, however; their registration applications were filled with errors and, as a result, were frequently denied. To remedy the problem, the AKC sent field agents to Lancaster County to teach these breeders the proper way to register their dogs.

"Without the active assistance of the AKC, Pennsylvania puppy mills would have never been established," Baker maintains. In fact, the Pennsylvania Federation of Dog Clubs, composed of member clubs of the AKC, was so livid over the AKC's involvement that its president, Dotsie Keith, met with Baker and the Federation of Humane Societies to help draft the state's original Dog Law. The legislature passed it in 1982.

By now, though, the industry was mushrooming. Across the country, breeders used the cachet of AKC registration papers to sell purebred puppies, and the AKC collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in registration fees. While nobody was looking, dog breeding exploded into a multibillion-dollar industry, profitable for operators but at the expense of millions of mistreated dogs.

Throughout the 1980s, the HSUS worked to rein in reckless breeders. With a camera in his pocket, Baker trespassed onto many properties to document abuse. By calling ahead and asking when a breeder was going to be home, he was also able to find out when

they were going to be away. He steeled himself to avoid eye contact with the animals and focus instead on recording as many grim details as he could. "You're just there to obtain evidence and get out," he recalled. In a matter of several grueling months, he visited 284 kennels.

Armed with Baker's research, the HSUS was able to push through some improvements. Pennsylvania and a few other states passed laws of their own to monitor large-volume dog breeding. Local humane societies frequently followed up on Baker's investigations by filing animal cruelty charges against breeders.

In Kansas in the late 1980s, Baker led state attorney general Robert Stephan on a tour of licensed kennels. Stephan was so sickened by them that he prosecuted some of the breeders himself. He called the worst offenders the Dirty Thirty. Breeders across the state shut down their operations rather than risk finding themselves in Stephan's crosshairs. The number of puppy mills in Kansas plummeted from nearly 1,200 to fewer than 300.

Meanwhile, the HSUS launched a campaign against Docktors Pet Center, the largest pet store chain in the United States, after discovering the stores were routinely selling sick dogs to customers. All 300 Docktors stores wound up closing as a result.

In 1993, Baker left his position as chief investigator for the HSUS to become a field investigator first for the Companion Animal Protection Society, and then for the Humane Farming Association. By 2005, he had visited more than 800 puppy mills and helped bring charges against dozens of breeders. He had done all he thought he could do and was ready to turn his attention elsewhere. He shipped a quarter-century's worth of archives, including some 800 photos, to fellow advocate Libby Williams, the cofounder of New Jersey Consumers Against Pet Shop Abuse, or NJCAPSA for short.

A year later, though, Baker was pulled back into the fray. Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell was getting ready to crack down on puppy mills, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) asked Baker to step in and help.

Elected to office in 2002, Rendell had spent his first term trying to reverse the state's high unemployment rate and jump-start its stagnant economy. He injected money into tourism and agriculture and launched a series of green initiatives to clean up rivers and streams and reclaim polluted industrial sites. The rumpled, self-confident officeholder had an ambitious agenda and was running for reelection in the fall. His schedule was on overload.

But Rendell was also a dog lover. He and his wife, Marjorie, a federal judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals' Third Circuit, had two Golden Retrievers adopted from rescue groups. No one needed to remind the governor that Pennsylvania was one of the top puppy-producing states in the country—infamous for the nickname Baker had bestowed upon it as the Puppy Mill Capital of the East. Roughly 2,500 kennels were licensed by the state to house anywhere from 26 to 500 dogs apiece, and hundreds more unlicensed kennels festered under the radar. In Lancaster County alone, Amish and Mennonite families operated 300 kennels, the largest concentration of puppy mills in the United States.

The proliferation of large-volume dog breeding was already a prickly subject with the governor. When a certain billboard surfaced along the Pennsylvania Turnpike one morning in February 2005, Rendell was downright mortified. The billboard showed a family of tourists decked out in Hawaiian shirts, riding gaily in a convertible, and in nostalgic, 1950s-era typography, the words, "Welcome to Scenic Lancaster County." Below that it said, "Home to hundreds of puppy mills. Learn more about Pennsylvania's notorious puppy mills. Visit these websites: mainlinerescue.com; stoppuppymills.org."

Rendell decided to form an ad hoc committee to study the success of the state's dog law. In January 2006, Baker met with the governor and agreed to serve on the panel. He was intimately familiar with Pennsylvania's statutes; four years after helping push through passage of the Dog Law, he'd promoted a state puppy

lemon law designed to compensate buyers who unwittingly purchased sick puppies.

The ad hoc committee consisted of representatives from the attorney general's office, the ASPCA, a veterinarian, and several ordinary citizens. To Baker's surprise, not everyone on the committee favored revamping the dog law. Several members blamed the problem on a few bad apples and overblown media coverage. "Even the person representing the governor's office was terrible," Baker said. "She made the comment that as long as there were poor people without health insurance, why were we worrying about dogs."

To convince them otherwise, fellow committee member Marsha Perelman, a businesswoman from Philadelphia's affluent Main Line and an ardent animal lover, hired an undercover investigator to document conditions at puppy mills. Baker followed up with more detective work of his own. He also turned to his friend Williams of NJCAPSA.

Williams, 55, had plenty of evidence to share. A passionate dog lover, she'd spent the last half-dozen years collecting and disseminating every iota of information she could find about Pennsylvania's puppy mills. She attended conventions for breeders, stayed abreast of Dog Law Advisory Board doings, and kept track of problem breeders who ran afoul of the state Dog Law Bureau. She focused on Pennsylvania because, of the seventy-plus pet stores in New Jersey that sold puppies, as many as half sold dogs brought in from the Keystone State. The rest were trucked in by brokers from the Midwest.

From her ground-floor office in her home in southwestern New Jersey, operating mostly on her own dime, Williams helped seek recourse for consumers who'd purchased ill or dying puppies from breeders or pet stores. She dug up kennel inspection records and passed along to consumers the information necessary to file a complaint. Every once in a while she wrote the complaint herself.

Posing as an uninformed buyer, Williams wangled her way into more than a dozen Pennsylvania puppy mills. She wanted to see for

Animal welfare advocate Marsha Perelman and veteran puppy mill investigator Bob Baker reach out to pet a puppy mill survivor. By 2006, Baker had visited more than 800 substandard kennels across the country. He knew better than anyone how weak and ineffective the laws governing kennel operators were.

herself if the appalling rumors she'd heard about these outfits were true. Not one of the dogs she saw in intensive confinement behaved normally; the animals either barked furiously or crouched in their cages, shell-shocked.

In 2005, Williams helped rescue eighty mixed-breed dogs when the broker died and his widow contacted her organization. The dogs were several months old and looked happy and socialized in their pens, but as soon as anyone reached in to pick them up, they were terrified—frozen, she recalled. At another puppy mill, a friend accompanying Williams furtively called her attention to a mother dog pacing about in a cage, a dead puppy hanging from her mouth. Elsewhere in the barn, breeding dog after breeding dog lay on wire

floors, nursing puppies. Years later, Williams was still haunted by the memory of the mother dogs refusing to make eye contact. "They looked down as if they were ashamed—as if to say, 'I'm not even worthy of having you look at me,'" she said. "They just looked so spent." She shook her head at the thought that, weeks later, unsuspecting buyers would spend up to $1,500 apiece for the puppies produced by these overbred dogs.

Pennsylvania's kennels were nothing short of scandalous. Newspapers had repeatedly exposed the conditions. Between 1991 and 1996, the *Pittsburgh Press, New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer,* and *New York Post* detailed the fetid environment, particularly in kennels operated by the Amish. To the surprise of many, Amish farmers admitted openly to raising dogs as livestock—they confined them to tiny cages and destroyed the breeding animals as soon as they

Libby Williams and Sweetie, a Gordon Setter who found a new life with her after ten years in a dilapidated kennel.

stopped producing. The *Post* described dogs caged in dimly lit barns—filthy, covered in feces and so broken in spirit they were "unresponsive to a visitor's presence and voice." The stories prompted the passage of the puppy lemon law, but did nothing to curtail the poor breeding practices.

Pennsylvania's 1982 law wasn't working, in large part because it wasn't being enforced. Breeders were ignoring space requirements and, worse, denying veterinary care to their dogs. When a dog became sick or injured, it simply languished; it cost the breeder too much to take the dog to the vet. A breeding dog's reward for producing litter after litter was to be shot dead around the age of 5 or 6.

The state laws created a situation that made it difficult, if not impossible, to nail unscrupulous breeders. Pennsylvania's dog wardens had the authority to inspect licensed breeders. But it was police officers employed by nonprofit humane societies who actually enforced the state's animal cruelty law. Unless they had a warrant, however, humane officers weren't allowed to enter private property to determine whether any cruelty had taken place. It was a classic Catch-22: The people who were permitted to see the problems were not allowed to do anything about them. In theory, dog wardens could inform humane officers of a problem, but few did.

The relationship between dog law officials and the breeders had grown far too cozy, as far as Williams was concerned. A bureau official later conceded that instead of reprimanding breeders for committing violations, wardens were more inclined to help them comply with the rules.

Pennsylvania had fifty-three dog wardens, and needed more. Money wasn't an issue. The state earmarked revenue from dog license sales to pay for enforcement, something most states didn't do. But Pennsylvania wasn't spending the money: Its Dog Law Bureau was sitting on a $14 million surplus.

The state's puppy lemon law needed tightening, too. Buyers who unknowingly purchased a sick or diseased dog had the right to return the puppy for a refund, exchange it for another dog, or seek

reimbursement for veterinary bills up to or equal to the purchase price of the dog. But the law didn't go far enough for families whose new pet turned out to have a life-threatening illness such as parvovirus or pneumonia; dog owners quickly racked up hundreds, if not thousands of dollars more in vet bills than they could ever hope to get back in the form of a refund.

The governor's ad hoc committee said breeders should be required to pay all of the veterinary bills associated with a sick puppy. The committee also said the attorney general's office should survey veterinarians to determine which kennels ill puppies were coming from, and publicize the puppy lemon law more aggressively to make sure buyers understood their rights. The absence of veterinary care provided to dogs in commercial kennels was the system's single biggest failure, Baker believed.

Aware that animal welfare advocates took a dim view of their practices, commercial breeders had become more careful to conceal their operations. Where once hutches full of dogs could be seen from the highway, the cash crops were now hidden inside low-slung metal barns. Some commercial breeders refused to deal with the public at all—they sold their dogs to brokers instead. A few breeders admitted to Baker that they knew people would be horrified if they saw their facilities up close.