

May 15, 2018

Attorney General Pam Bondi
Office of Attorney General
State of Florida, The Capitol PL-01
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1050

Commissioner Adam Putnam
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Plaza Level 10, The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.,
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0800

Melissa Nelson
State Attorney Office For The Fourth Judicial Circuit
311 W Monroe St.
Jacksonville, FL 32202

Dear Attorney General Bondi, Commissioner Putnam and State Attorney Nelson,

On behalf of the citizens in Northeast Florida, we request an immediate investigation into Jacksonville and Orange Park pet stores covering up a widespread outbreak of Parvovirus, Giardia and Bordatella, and intentionally selling puppies that have been exposed to these diseases to unsuspecting customers. We have received numerous reports of customers purchasing sick puppies from local pet stores, primarily from Pet World (Jacksonville) and BFF Puppies (Orange Park), but also including reported cases from Pet Land (Jacksonville) and Puppies Galore (Orange Park). After talking with customers and employees of these stores, we believe there is a widespread outbreak of Parvovirus, Giardia and Bordatella (kennel cough) that has gone on for months and is not being disclosed to their customers.

According to employees in the pet stores, who asked to remain anonymous, more than 40 puppies from these pet stores have died of Parvo, Giardia and Bordatella in the past 4 months. Customers are not being informed about these outbreaks, and they are not being warned about the danger to these puppies, or other animals that come in contact with them in their homes or neighborhoods. Instead of dealing with the outbreak properly, store owners are intentionally covering it up to maximize their profits.

We believe these violations include:

- Public Endangerment
- Aggravated Animal Cruelty
- Fraud

1. Public Endangerment

Pet store owners, management and employees are intentionally and knowingly exposing customers in their stores to sick puppies. They are also intentionally and knowingly spreading these diseases throughout Jacksonville, Orange Park and Northeast Florida by knowingly selling puppies that have been exposed to the infected animals and are at risk of contracting these diseases.

- When a shelter has a case of Parvovirus, they follow strict protocols to prevent the spread of the disease, including: temporarily closing the facility, deep cleaning the entire shelter, and quarantining other dogs who may be at risk until they are past the incubation period. Shelters also contact adopters and fosters who have other dogs who may have come into contact with the infected animals before they left the shelter. These local pet stores have taken none of these precautions. Instead, they continued business as usual, knowingly selling other puppies who have been exposed to these diseases and may be at risk themselves.
- Parvovirus can live on hard surfaces, in grass and dirt for 6-12 months. By knowingly selling puppies that had been exposed to others shedding the virus, the pet store owners and management sent these animals out to spread the disease throughout the community. Unsuspecting buyers may have exposed other animals in their homes and neighborhoods. Simply taking the new puppy for a walk, taking them to the dog park, or visiting with friends and neighbors could spread parvovirus throughout the community.
- According to the Merck Veterinary Manual, “Virus is shed in the feces of infected dogs within 4–5 days of exposure (often before clinical signs develop), throughout the period of illness, and for ~10 days after clinical recovery.” Clinical signs usually develop within 2-14 days of infection. When puppies in a pet store were diagnosed with parvovirus, every other puppy in the store at the time was at risk. The store management should have temporarily closed the store and all breeding locations, deep cleaned the entire store, breeding locations, and transport vehicles, and quarantined all other puppies. Instead they allowed members of the public to handle sick puppies, and customers to buy them, therefore spreading the outbreak instead of containing it.
- After handling a puppy, pet stores do require customers to use hand sanitizer before handling another puppy, but that is not an acceptable or effective precaution during an outbreak. Hand sanitizer will not kill parvovirus, so customers and employees may be passing the virus on to other puppies in the stores, or to their own animals at home.

These pet stores are breaking every rule in the book. They are focused on maximizing their profits, and willfully and knowingly spreading these diseases through the community.

2. Animal Cruelty

Florida Statute 828.12 states:

*a person who owns or has the custody or control of any animal **and fails to act, which results in the cruel death, or excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering, or causes the same to be done, commits aggravated animal cruelty.***

Aggravated Animal Cruelty is a felony offense, and it happens with puppies in pet stores every single day.

- Puppies are left in their cages with watering tubes that are the type used for hamsters, leaving the puppies dehydrated and lethargic. Apparently this makes the puppies appear 'less active' and reduces the amount of cleaning up in the display cases where they are kept. This practice of intentionally keeping puppies dehydrated constitutes animal cruelty. We believe the dehydration is also causing unnecessary health problems for the puppies, and it may be increasing their susceptibility to these illnesses.
- Sick puppies have died cruel deaths because the pet store staffs are not caring for them properly. According to store employees and customers, when they did get sick, the pet store owners routinely declined treatment that may have saved them because it would have been "too expensive." In effect, they treat the puppies like excess inventory and simply discard them when they get sick.
- Other employees have reported that puppies routinely die inside the pet stores. We believe these deaths are not reported, and the records may have been deleted from the computer systems.

3. Fraud

Pet store owners and their employees have committed numerous fraudulent transactions by intentionally omitting material facts and failing to disclose these dangerous outbreaks and repeated health problems to their customers.

Florida Statute, 517.301, Fraudulent transactions; falsification or concealment of facts.

1. *To employ any device, scheme, or artifice to defraud;*
2. *To obtain money or property by means of any untrue statement of a material fact or any omission to state a material fact necessary in order to make the statements made, in the light of the circumstances under which they were made, not misleading; or*
3. *To engage in any transaction, practice, or course of business which operates or would operate as a fraud or deceit upon a person.*

- These pet store owners and managers are knowingly selling sick puppies, and selling puppies that have been exposed to sick animals and in danger of contracting these illnesses, without disclosing these material facts to potential buyers.
- In some cases, store owners offered refunds or free replacement when puppies died. In other cases, they refused to reimburse the customers, blaming the customer for “letting the puppy get sick” when they knew that there was an outbreak in the store.
- When puppies are getting sick and dying over a period of months, that is a material fact that pet stores have an obligation to disclose to potential customers.

These pet stores have done everything wrong with their Parvovirus, Giardia and Kennel Cough outbreaks. Instead of temporarily shutting down, contacting previous customers to warn them about the danger, sanitizing the stores and quarantining the animals until the danger is past, they covered it up and continued selling sick puppies to unsuspecting customers. In doing so, we believe they committed fraud.

We have witnesses who are willing to testify as part of an official investigation. We respectfully request that you:

- Interview all the pet store employees under oath;
- Review veterinary records of all animals that came into the stores or their holding, breeding and/or boarding facilities;
- Review transport and purchase records of animals coming into the stores, and compare them to sales records to determine if missing animals died and their records were deleted.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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 Eunity Thornton	 Karen Hayt	 Mariah Baker
 Dee Rowell	 Julie Lepper	 Dawn Anderson

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cc: First Coast News; News4Jax; Action News Jax; Florida Times-Union; WOKV News

Citizens Against Pet Store Abuse

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