

Rescuing the Rescued: The Importance of CT Shelter Legislation

By Mary L. deManbey 1312 words, without the Bill Summary sidebar

Animal shelters are supposed to be places of refuge where abandoned and abused animals are cared for until they can find their forever homes. Sadly, as evidenced by recent Connecticut news stories about animal cruelty cases, some well-intentioned shelters end up causing more harm than good.

Unfortunately, without a clear business plan and understanding of what it takes to run a shelter, these rescuers are ill-equipped to properly care for the animals in their charge. It's not unusual, then, for them to become overwhelmed, creating poor and inhospitable conditions for the animals they were originally trying to help. One way to prevent this too-common outcome is to enact legislation requiring shelters to be licensed and inspected.

According to the Connecticut (CT) State Department of Agriculture, pet shops, municipal dog pounds, training facilities and grooming facilities must be inspected and licensed. Also, any breeders or persons operating a kennel are subject to licensing and inspection.

However, there is currently no Connecticut statute requiring the licensing and inspection of animal shelters. "It's an unregulated industry with nothing to protect the consumer or the animals," says Ray Connors, Animal Control Supervisor for the CT State Department of Agriculture. He says in light of recent animal cruelty cases in this state, there is a concern about the proliferation of shelters run by people who do not have the knowledge or resources to do so appropriately.

“I’ve seen nightmare situations where there are animals in crates, having been caged for hours, without exercise, or attention,” says Connors. “A person has to know what his or her limitations are and how many animals one can save.”

Connors says that when they inspect municipal shelters, it’s for the protection of the animals and to prevent the spread of disease. “Our whole focus is the way the animals are housed. Licensing shelters would serve the same need.”

Online adoptions and the importation of animals only exacerbate the already-difficult situation. Connors says that in 2014, close to 20,000 animals were imported into Connecticut. Recently, an animal rescuer was arrested in a parking lot after Animal Control officers found the cats and dogs lying in their own waste in small crates. The animals also had not been let out of their crates during the long trip from the south to the north. Sadly, two of the cats had to be immediately euthanized.

In another case where a shelter had been shut down because of inhumane conditions, it was discovered that the rescuer had accepted a number of imported dogs and cats. In still another incident – with a slightly different twist – a Connecticut woman advertised online that she was rescuing and selling imported dogs, but the sales turned out to be a scam, as she, in fact, had no dogs to sell. “It has become a multi-million dollar business,” observes Connors.

In Connecticut, any animals imported from out of state must be registered with the state. Animal importers must be licensed, and they must notify the CT State Department of Agriculture and local zoning officer of any sales, adoptions or transfer of animals that are open to the public, at least 10 days before any sale. In addition, each animal must have a health certificate.

Unfortunately, too many importers do not comply with these regulations, according to Connors. The result is that too many adopters innocently meet these importers in parking lots to pick up their new animal family member, not knowing what they are getting.

A Bill to Set Things Right

Our Companions is proposing legislation that will stop the proliferation of shelters that are unknowingly creating harm to rescued animals by not adhering to proper standards of care (see accompanying box for highlights of the proposed standards). Now, more than ever, it is important that the general public is made aware of the plight of these animals.

“Over the years I’ve seen a sad deterioration in the professionalism of the animal rescue movement,” says Susan Linker, CEO of Our Companions Animal Rescue. “If we have to rescue animals from an animal rescue, there’s something very wrong.

“So many well-intentioned people want to help homeless animals and that’s laudable and very much appreciated. But people don’t know what it takes to run a nonprofit organization. You need proper Board governance, financial resources and donors. Acting like a pet shop and exchanging fees for animals, isn’t rescue. It’s very hard to raise money and it’s even harder to say no when your facility is at capacity.

“In many rescues I’ve observed that if they have a cage available then it’s filled, regardless of the standard of care, and that invariably leads to conditions that are unprofessional and even neglectful. I’ve seen feral cats living cages for years, and that’s just cruel and unacceptable,” she says.

Additional Benefits

Like the stories you hear about people unknowingly adopting sick animals from pet stores, persons adopting from a shelter may assume that their new family member is free from illness. They may accept the conditions in the shelters as being typical of all shelters. Licensing shelters would require stricter oversight of the health of the animals and would, by extension, benefit the adopters as well.

Most people are not aware of the large financial burden incurred by their town when an animal shelter is shut down due to conditions' having escalated to become an animal cruelty concern. At that point, Animal Control must step in and seize all the animals. The town must then pay to house and care for the animals while the case is being tried in court. This judicial process can take months or even years, and all the while the animals are in limbo and confined in shelters and pounds. The price tag can be several thousands of dollars to the town.

The proposed legislation would prevent these unnecessary cruelty cases and animal seizures by allowing Animal Control officers to inspect shelters and intervene legally if there are standard-of-care issues, to ensure that the situation does not escalate.

Impact on the Rescue Movement

Some would argue that the need for shelters outweighs the need to license facilities, since it may result in the closing of shelters that are not in compliance. To be clear, the bill does not aim to shut down facilities, but it does seek to assure that these animals are properly cared for and are not harmed. "No Animal Control officer wants to shut down a shelter, they would much rather get in there and educate people and support them in making their conditions professional and humane," says Linker.

Connors concurs and says there are a number of well-run shelters in the state. “I only see shelters getting shut down if they will not comply with legal statutes,” he says. “If they aren’t willing to meet the regulations, then they shouldn’t be operating a shelter in the first place. If you’re going to run a shelter, you need to define what it is. The bottom line is [ensuring] the health and welfare of the animal.”

OC will be working to get this bill introduced and passed during the next legislative session. Please be watching for legislative alerts seeking your help in contacting your legislators. Visit www.ourcompanions.org to learn more about this important issue.

(optional, if you need to fill space)

Proposed Animal Shelter Standards and Facility Requirements Summary

- **Buildings and premises should be in good repair and in sanitary conditions**, including: walls and floors that can be hosed, scrubbed, or sponged, equipment free of rust, a washing area with hot and cold running water, natural or artificial illumination during daylight hours, cages and enclosure in non-stressful illumination, proper equipment for the storage and disposal of wastes and contaminated materials, and animal cages or enclosures equipped with solid floors.
- **Ventilation and temperature shall be properly maintained** to minimize odor, disease transmission, and unnecessary stress on the animals; providing heating and cooling systems to maintain proper comfort and health conditions, and installing a working thermometer in all areas where animals are cared for.

- **Minimum standards of care** for facilities, enclosures shall include:
 - sufficient size and design to allow animals to stand, sit, lie down, turn around and make other normal postural adjustments with no interferences from food, water bowls, equipment or other animals; cleaned daily, unimpeded access to fresh water and food, provide staffing for adequate care, provide emergency and standard veterinary care, be protected from the elements, be free from contamination by excrement, urine and other matter, be housed in compatible groups without overcrowding.
- **Breeding prohibited** – no female animal shall be kept with an unneutered male animal of the same species.