



PUPPY MILL CRUELTY: **THE USDA'S FAILURE TO PROTECT** **VULNERABLE DOGS**



A review of USDA oversight in 2024

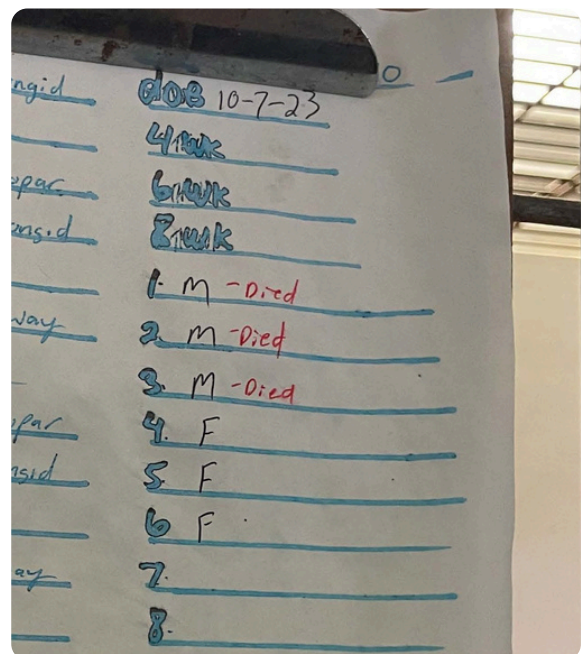
Dogs began dying just a few months after the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued Wuanita Swedlund a license to breed, buy and sell dogs. Swedlund told the USDA she found three deceased puppies. She blamed a draft in the barn that caused the puppies to get cold. Three puppies from another litter were also found dead. Swedlund believed the mother dog was overgrooming them, leaving them wet and cold. A month later, a Husky who had recently given birth chewed through the wall of her enclosure, reaching a Sheepdog and her new litter of puppies. Swedlund said one of the puppies was found severely injured, and the USDA noted that “the entire front leg was missing [and] the skin and bone was exposed.” The puppy was euthanized. A week later, another puppy went missing, and only a bone was found. Swedlund believed the mother dog ate the puppy, and the USDA surmised that the cannibalism was related to stress.



Among the 150 dogs Swedlund kept, the USDA also found a month-old Poodle-mix with hard swellings on his leg who could not walk normally. A pregnant French Bulldog was lame and not receiving treatment. A puppy with an abnormal limb was treated only with peroxide and antibiotic ointment. Another dog had sores on her foot that Swedlund didn't notice. A Pug's hernia was growing. Medications were expired, and records of dogs' births, deaths, sales and transfers were inaccurate or missing. The USDA wrote up their findings, took some photos and left.

A few weeks later, a USDA inspector returned to see if Swedlund addressed the numerous and serious animal welfare issues. She had not. The USDA wrote another report detailing the unresolved issues and noted additional issues, including that Swedlund had no employees and was the only one caring for all the dogs.

Despite the clear evidence of suffering animals and this licensee's inability to provide care, the USDA did not remove a single dog and took no action. Swedlund remains licensed by the USDA.



The USDA failed at its job.

The USDA's job is to ensure that individuals and businesses that breed, sell, exhibit, research or transport animals for profit are providing humane care as required by federal law. This includes the hundreds of thousands of dogs who are used by commercial breeding facilities to produce puppies sold in pet stores and online, for research or otherwise "sight-unseen" by the final buyer. The wholesale production and sale of dogs for profit creates serious risks for exploitation. These dogs, who are quite literally hidden in dark barns and invisible to the public eye, are among our country's most vulnerable.

The ASPCA has reviewed and analyzed thousands of inspection and enforcement records of USDA-licensed dog dealers published by the USDA or obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests. They paint a picture of what "USDA-licensed" looked like in 2024 – what the USDA is doing and not doing to prevent and address pervasive issues that harm dogs each and every day.

- ▶ In 2024, the USDA licensed hundreds of dog dealers who had ***histories of failing to provide care to dogs.***
- ▶ ***45%*** of the commercial dog dealers licensed during 2024 never had a compliance inspection.
- ▶ ***One out of every five*** USDA inspections uncovered failures.
- ▶ USDA inspection reports detail over ***800 violations*** at dog-breeding facilities across the country.
- ▶ ***Only two*** dog dealers who violated the law in 2024 lost their USDA licenses.
- ▶ ***Only two*** dog dealers who violated the law in 2024 paid fines.
- ▶ ***Not a single dog was removed from a facility.***

A quarter of a million dogs were in 2,500 USDA-licensed facilities.

The Animal Welfare Act is intended to ensure the humane treatment of animals and sets minimum welfare requirements for animal businesses such as puppy mills and other commercial breeding operations, zoos and research institutions. These standards are minimal at best and nowhere near what most people would consider humane. The USDA is responsible for implementing the Animal Welfare Act, including licensing and registering businesses, inspecting facilities, and investigating and taking action against violators.

In 2024, the USDA oversaw **over 17,500 licensed or registered facilities**. Less than one-third of these facilities were inspected within the year. The USDA documented over 4,000 violations, with one out of every five inspections revealing a violation.

For dogs alone, around **2,500 commercial dog dealers were licensed**. These include both dog breeders who breed dogs to produce high volumes of puppies and brokers who purchase and resell puppies for profit. Commercial dog dealers in full compliance with the law can keep dogs in stacked, wire cages only six inches longer than the dog in each direction. Female dogs can be bred continually, churning out litter after litter.



Are Pet Stores or Online Sellers USDA-Licensed?

Retail pet stores are exempt from licensing and inspection requirements because buyers have the opportunity to examine potential pets before purchasing them. With internet sales, people don't have this same opportunity to see the dog in person. Beginning in 2013, the USDA clarified that internet sellers are required to be USDA-licensed.

Now Birds!

Birds bred and sold for the pet trade or for exhibition are now covered under the Animal Welfare Act. Since this change went into effect in 2023, 1,300 facilities with birds have been inspected, including 300 new businesses.

Dogs suffered in USDA-licensed facilities.

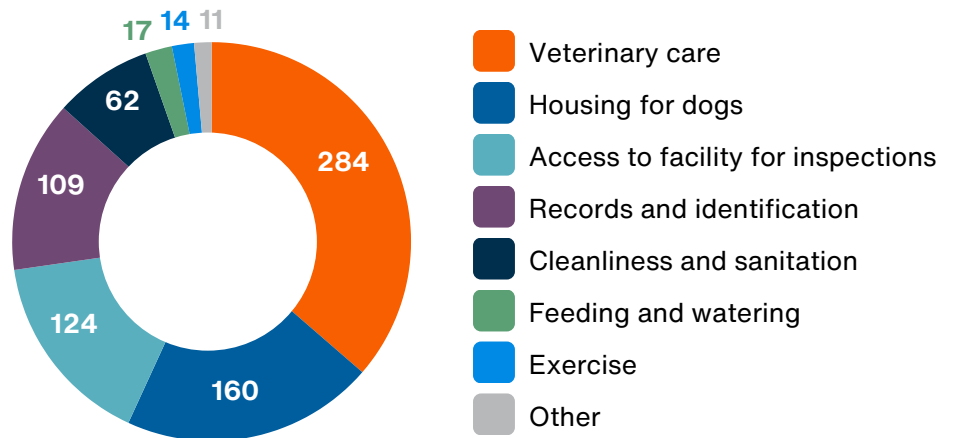
In 2024, the USDA documented over **800 instances** where licensed dog dealers failed to meet the minimum standards required by law.

These instances included:

- Dogs without shelter, clean food and water or veterinary care.
- Dogs who could not walk, dogs living in waste, dogs with painful wounds, and dogs suffering from contagious and deadly diseases.
- Dogs who died in barn fires, in fights with other dogs, from the cold, or with no explanation at all.



Violation Types for Dog Dealers in 2024



What are direct and critical violations?

Direct means that the violation is currently “having a serious or severe adverse effect on the health and well-being of the animal.” **Critical** means that it was a direct violation that occurred previously, prior to the inspection. These designations are **inconsistently used and not actually defined** in the Animal Welfare Act. However, according to high-level officials within the USDA, they are the only basis for enforcement actions. Even if someone has a high number of violations or repeat violations, if they are not listed as “direct” or “critical,” they do not lead to enforcement.

30% of the violations found were for **veterinary care issues** — dogs were sick, injured or even dead without having been seen by a veterinarian or given medical care.

Larry Albrecht, Greene, Iowa: The USDA saw an **emaciated** Shih Tzu who had a “hard labor” and gave birth to seven stillborn puppies and only one surviving puppy. She had “**visible ribs, vertebrae and hip bones with little to no fat or muscle covering**” and **her tail was nearly hairless**. The owner, who has operated this kennel for over 20 years, had not noticed the dog’s condition, and she was under no veterinary treatment.



Amos Zimmerman, East Earl, Pennsylvania: The USDA documented two dogs with **cloudy eyes crusted with yellow pus and adhered wood shavings**. They had not been seen by a veterinarian.



Gail McGonigal, Alicia, Arkansas: **Two puppies died** when the facility owner intentionally did not consult with a veterinarian, despite observing the puppies were weak. She made no attempt to help or learn if they were nursing well “as she believed the puppies were going to die.” The USDA also saw a nursing mother Shih Tzu who was **very thin**, potentially to the point of being unable to provide milk for her four puppies.

Donna Taber, Wasola, Missouri: The USDA found four dogs covered in **painful, matted fur** and suffering from severe, untreated dental disease with **swollen and receding gums** and teeth covered in tartar. The USDA inspector directed the owner to have the dogs seen by a veterinarian and treat these conditions, however when the USDA returned a week later to follow up, they found one dog still covered in excess mats and the other dogs still suffering from severe dental disease.



Dogs were kept in **cages** too small for them to turn around in, outdoors without protection from the freezing cold or blazing sun, and in crowded and dangerous enclosures that led to fights and injuries.



Charles and Debbi McGinnis, Bolivar, Missouri: Eight dogs were housed **outside in the blistering sun**. They had **no shade** at all, and several of them were **panting** from the heat. A Boxer was also housed outside, his only shelter **too small** for him to stand upright.



Arthur L. Schmucker, Clyde, New York: The USDA reviewed records from the previous months to learn that on three separate occasions **dogs died from fighting with other dogs** in the shared exercise yard. The owner had not ensured that the dogs sharing space were compatible before putting them together.



Angela Weaver, Howe, Oklahoma: After the owner avoided inspections for almost three years, the USDA finally arrived at the dog dealer's facility to find dogs kept in **enclosures with holes, crumbling insulation, rusted walls, mud, pools of waste, pests and feces**. Other dogs were severely **matted**, and required records were unavailable. There were nearly 100 dogs present, well over the maximum number the facility had been authorized for, and employees **admitted to not knowing how to care for puppies who required bottle-feeding**. A few months later, the USDA returned to find an injured Corgi with his **lip and nose torn** and separated 1-2 inches from his face and dogs kept outside in high temperatures and in **enclosures flooded and muddy** with no dry land to stand on.

Dogs were **living in filth**, covered in feces, urine, flies and trash, with **dirty food and water**.

Ellen Roberts, West Plains, Missouri: The USDA noted that an enclosure housing a Boxer and her litter of six puppies was dirty with “**excessive waste and grime**” on the floors and caked material along the edges which was “**attracting numerous flies.**” Four of the puppies appeared **lethargic**. One puppy had watery, yellow diarrhea, and another was too **thin**. The dogs were lying on a blanket stained with diarrhea. The mother dog was very thin, her **ribs visible**.

Harvey E. Miller, Greenwood, New York: A puppy was found **slumped against his empty water bowl** during an inspection. The puppy, referred to as number 2444, was much smaller than his littermates and could not reach the tall water spout. The USDA directed the facility to fill the bowl for him, and **he drank for three minutes straight**.

Randy Hartsuiker, Big Springs, Nebraska: The USDA saw filthy dog enclosures, with an accumulation of **feces, urine, grime, broken plywood and pieces of plastic and carpet**.



Dog dealers freely and frequently turned the USDA away.

Commercial dealers are required to make their premises available for unannounced inspections and get to choose which times work best for them. However, more than 100 times in 2024, licensees turned the USDA away. These “attempted inspections” are a serious violation, yet the USDA frequently allows repeated attempted inspections to go uncorrected and unpunished, even when they have reason to believe the dogs are at risk.

David Weaver, Millersburg, Ohio: The licensee has been cited for **nine separate attempted inspections** in the past two years. On the few occasions the USDA was able to see his dogs, they documented medical conditions that had been “occurring for an extended period of time” and left untreated. It is clear that there were additional welfare concerns during the times the USDA was unable to inspect. The USDA took no action, and instead allowed him to keep turning them away.

Freeman Beechy, Hillsboro, Ohio: A dog dealer avoided the USDA, **missing four inspections in a row**. He had seemingly moved away, yet the USDA has no record of where his facility or his dogs are now. They continued trying to inspect the abandoned facility.

Karen/Wayne Miller, Middlebury, Indiana: The USDA arrived at this facility during optimal hours and were told “**this was not a good day for inspection**” and that they “**did not want to do the inspection.**” The facility had previously had been documented for a female dog with a “**softball-sized**” vaginal prolapse. Yet the USDA allowed themselves to be turned away.

Elisa Brandvik, Ozark, Arkansas: This facility owner became **hostile, aggressive** and **verbally abusive** toward the USDA and would not allow them to continue their inspections. She placed **aggressive and unwelcoming signs** around her property. When the USDA began to look at an Old English Sheepdog who had a shaved ear and sutures, she yelled at them and **kicked them off her property**.



USDA records don't tell the whole story.

The USDA **limits** the number of observed animal welfare violations that show up on a licensee's record. They do this by:

- directing inspectors not to record certain issues
- cutting documented findings from inspection reports
- allowing facilities to fix issues during the inspection
- conducting unofficial and unrecorded site visits
- allowing commercial dealers to operate under multiple license numbers

State agencies or local law enforcement may also inspect USDA-licensed dog-breeding facilities, sometimes even on the same day as the USDA. Yet there are frequently discrepancies between these inspections, with problems identified on state reports that are absent from USDA reports.

Ridglan Farms, Blue Mounds, Wisconsin: Wisconsin state officials inspected this facility breeding Beagles for research and its 3,000 dogs in early 2024. They found one dog with **puncture and scratch wounds** on his snout. Another dog was **limping**, unable to bear weight on her front leg swollen with puncture wounds. Several buildings had “**a film of organic waste**” beneath enclosures due to backed up drains. The USDA inspected around the same time and did not include record of these issues.

Curtis Martin, Seneca Falls, New York: In May 2024, New York inspectors conducted a routine inspection of this 300-dog breeding facility and found multiple issues. Dogs' feet were able to pass through the wire flooring, a **strong odor** was present throughout the facility, at least six separate enclosures were covered in **excess waste**, medications were not properly labeled and many records were unavailable for inspection. USDA inspection reports did not document these issues.



A clean USDA record means very little.

USDA issued licenses to dealers with documented violations.

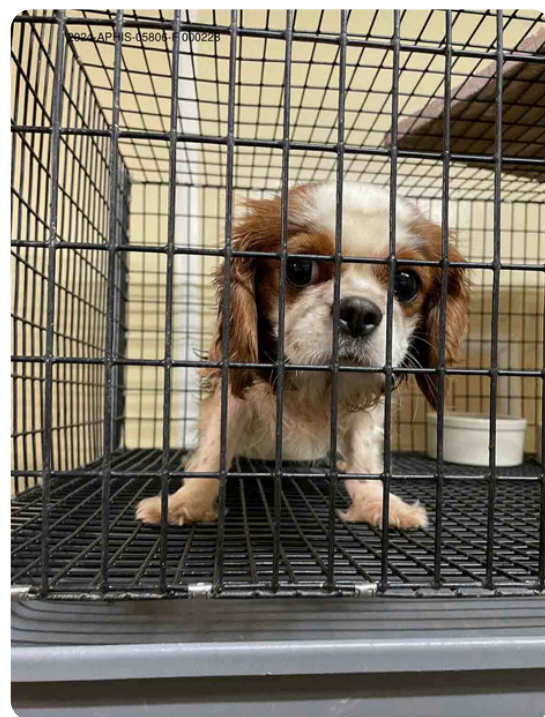
100% of commercial dog dealers who asked for a USDA license in 2024 got one.

We've identified dealers who received a license despite long histories of problematic care documented by the USDA, animal welfare issues documented by state agencies, formal warnings and even involvement in criminal cases with animals. In some cases, the USDA found violations the same day they determined licensees were in compliance and ready to be licensed.

Chris McGill, McAlester, Oklahoma: The USDA issued a license to this facility, despite documenting violations of care for over a decade, including several **deceased, decaying and actively dying puppies**, dog enclosures filled with waste and an infestation of cockroaches.



Ed Van Doorn, Barnes, Iowa: According to an inspection report, the facility owner, who is not a veterinarian, **performed neutering operations on his dogs** in “a multi-use room used for grooming, surgeries and other procedures.” Three months later, the USDA issued him a new license.



Heath Meyers, Grundy Center, Iowa: During an inspection, the USDA found Willow, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, with a **large, open wound** on her side, and another on her neck, potentially from an altercation with another dog. Another dog, Luna, who was suffering severe dental issues, **reacted painfully** when inspectors touched her mouth. The USDA returned a few months later and found young puppies housed in unsafe enclosures. However, they allowed the facility to renew their license that very day.

Dog dealers who want to be licensed complete a one-page application, pay a \$120 fee and pass just one of three scheduled inspections.

That's all it takes.

Recent changes to USDA policy may mean fewer inspections.

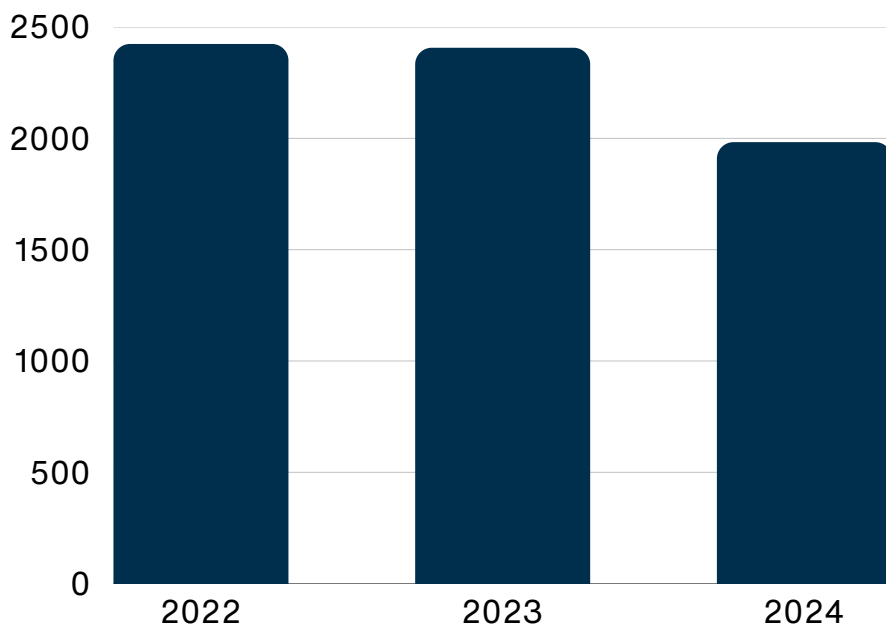
The only way the USDA can determine if dog dealers are following the law is through inspections. These may be the only time breeding dogs are ever seen by anyone other than facility employees. Historically, the USDA's goal has been an inspection every 12 months.

However, with the recent extension of licenses to three years and no requirement that the USDA conduct inspections with any specific frequency, dog dealers can go up to three years without inspectors setting foot on their property.

In 2024, the USDA conducted nearly 2,000 compliance inspections of dog dealers and 800 other licensing inspections, less than they did in the previous two years.

AJ's Angels, Cushing, Minnesota: One of the largest commercial breeders the USDA oversees keeps over 1,000 dogs in their Minnesota facility. It has been **over three years** since the USDA last conducted a compliance inspection.

There were fewer compliance inspections of dog dealers in 2024 than previous years.



45%

of licensed dog dealers in 2024 did not have a compliance inspection.

The USDA witnessed over 800 instances of harm to dogs. Their overwhelming response was **nothing**.

In 2024, **335** dog dealers had documented violations. Over **65%** of those had violations in previous years. **The USDA took action against only three dog dealers who violated this year.**

Federal law allows for a maximum penalty of \$14,206 per violation. For dog dealers alone, this means **the USDA could have collected over \$11 million. They assessed less than 0.5% of this.** Only two dog dealers who violated this year were fined.

Even one violation is a justification for license revocation. This means in 2024, **335** dog dealers could have faced revocation. **Only two dog dealers who violated this year had their licenses revoked.**

The USDA also assessed a handful of other penalties and revocations for dog dealers who were already inactive and had issues from years ago. **These do not and are not intended to address current animal care issues.**

Twenty-one commercial dealers were given only a warning after the USDA documented their violations. Eighty percent of the violations which resulted in only a warning were labeled direct or critical. All but four of the dealers had documented violations on prior inspections.

Most critically, warnings did not stop dealers from continuing to break the law. **More than half of the dealers who received warnings still failed to meet the standards** set by the Animal Welfare Act after their warnings.

The USDA saw over 200,000 dogs in licensed commercial facilities in 2024. Many of these dogs were suffering as a result of a dealer's failure or unwillingness to provide appropriate care. Beyond penalties, revocations and warnings, the USDA has the authority and obligation to remove animals.

In 2024, no dogs were removed from USDA-licensed facilities.

There is no record of the USDA confiscating a single dog since the agency began posting such records in 2019.

Methodology

Data in this report were compiled using information provided by the USDA through its [Inspection Report Public Search Tool](#), [Animal Welfare and Horse Protection Actions](#) database, [List of Active Licensees and Registrants](#) and through FOIA requests to the USDA, DOJ and state agencies. Dog dealers were identified as Class A or B USDA-licensees with dogs or puppies in their inventories.

Throughout, the year 2024 is used to refer to Fiscal Year 2024, which ran from October 1, 2023-September 30, 2024. This is also true for other years.

All photographs included in this report are of USDA licensees. The USDA does not post photos proactively. All photos were received by the ASPCA through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The USDA only takes photos in very limited circumstances. It can take the USDA months to respond to such requests.

