

Testimony: NO rabbits in CT pet stores

Submitted by:

Marlene Wilhelm

The House Rabbit Connection, Inc.

CT/MA

To the Task Force:

Having worked in rabbit rescue for more than a dozen years, I have had many opportunities to see firsthand the housing conditions, care, and lack of education regarding domestic rabbits in CT pet stores.

I am appalled at the conditions rabbits are kept in and cared for in pet stores in CT, and the lack of education provided staff and management to provide proper information to prospective purchasers.

I will share a few of the conditions I have experienced in the past several years. These examples are a portion of a much larger problem that currently exists in pet shops.

Yuppy Puppy, Guilford, CT: On a trip to the store, I witnessed rabbits with NO hay, NO water, and NO rabbit food pellets. When brought to the attention of the staff, I was told they were busy and hadn't had a chance to replenish their food/water (note: I had been in the store for at least 20 minutes and myself and 2 others were the only patrons there). However, there was NO dish present in the large rubber bin they were in. They did get water and food for them as I waited. I asked about information about buying a bunny and they said they didn't have anything, but if asked, they referred folks to the internet. They had a starter set for bunnies which included pine shavings. Soft wood shavings like cedar and pine cannot be used around rabbits; they release phenols (it's what gives them their unique fragrance) that accumulate in the liver of rabbits that can lead to health problems. <http://www.rabbit.org/care/shavings.html>

On subsequent visits, other folks were given the same story of why the bunnies had no food and water: they were 'busy'. Again, no other customers other than the person inquiring were in the establishment.

Pet Supply Plus (PSP), Wethersfield, CT: A customer contacted me about witnessing a rabbit in the store that was making noises. When she asked the clerk about the bunny, she was told that 'rabbits make noise all the time'. (Fact: being a prey animal, rabbits only make noise under duress or if sick.) The store owner had the rabbit brought to the vet, where it was subsequently euthanized from an illness. According to the Wethersfield ACO who was able to corroborate the event, several new rabbits were put into the existing cage. Those rabbits later needed to be put down because they too contracted the same disease the initial rabbit contracted. Had the housing been adequately cleaned, especially after knowing a diseased rabbit occupied the same space, those rabbits may have stood a fair chance at having a healthy life.

Pet Supply Plus (PSP), West Hartford, CT: After receiving a complaint from a rabbit owner about the housing conditions in this store, I made a visit to see for myself. I witnessed several rabbits in a glass aquarium with heat lamps (such as a lizard would be kept in) with no water in their water bottle and no food. (Fact: rabbits need room and plenty of ventilation. Glass aquariums do not provide adequate ventilation. Heat lamps raise the body temperatures of the animals beneath them. Rabbits cannot tolerate heat, which stresses their systems.) I asked a clerk why there was no food in the cage and they told me they get fed twice a day. The clerk got the manager upon my request, and they did open a bin under the cage, fed the rabbits and gave them water, which the rabbits very quickly attacked. (Fact: rabbit's digestive tracts are identical to horses – their guts must remain in motion continually to prevent shut down (known as GI stasis)). I contacted Jason, the owner of 9 PSP stores in CT, with headquarters in Windsor, CT. Jason said his business was a family business and they were very concerned about the pets. I offered to provide training to his staff about rabbit care, diet, and housing, to discuss adoption options, and provide them with free care guides for potential buyers.

Jason offered to try a pilot program in the store and told me to get in touch with his manager Linda. When I contacted Linda she stated that 'he will never stop selling rabbits' and hung up on me.

Portraits Plus, West Farms Mall (seasonal): Several complaints had come in to HRC over the past several years about this storefront location within the mall. They set up each year prior to Easter explicitly to provide photos for a fee of children with rabbits for the holiday. Until last year, the rabbits were in the front window to entice kids and lure families into the store. I made a trip to WestFarms Mall and inquired about bringing children in for photos where I had the chance to view the bunnies. The rabbits clearly had no food and water available to them. They were also kept on open-wire mesh floors to allow feces/urine to drop through. Open-wire mesh floors cause a painful condition called 'sore hocks' on rabbit feet. Their nails, feet and ankles can also get caught in the mesh and injure the rabbit. The rabbits were given a drink coaster-sized piece of cardboard to stand on – enough only to put their 4 paws on. Rabbits should be allowed a sufficient solid surface to go on at will and should be large enough to lay on and spread out on to sleep.

When I inquired about food/water, I was told they get fed twice a day to keep them clean (I assume so a bunny doesn't defecate/urinate on a pretty Easter dress or outfit). I did ask to see their paperwork on the rabbits--which is supposed to be available upon request--and was met with a lot of questions and resistance. Eventually, they did provide the books, but would not allow me to make any notes.

Sadly, rescues/shelters are usually the last stop when uneducated pet owners learn the pet they purchased is more work than they anticipated, or cannot keep up with the higher-than-average veterinary bills. Rabbits--again as prey animals--are extremely fragile and delicate animals and can literally die from fear. They are not a hardy species and not well adapted to every family. Unfortunately, the ones who suffer are the rabbits and shelters/rescues who are already full.

I would like to see a law passed that will no longer allow rabbits (as well as cats and dogs) that come from breeders to be sold in pet stores and kept in unsatisfactory conditions.

I urge the Task Force to support the Puppy Mill Bill.

Regards,

Marlene Wilhelm

President,

The House Rabbit Connection, Inc. serving CT/MA

Chapter Manager,

The House Rabbit Society CT/MA

marlene@hopline.org

