

SMALL DOGS

BIG CRISIS

Chihuahuas crowd California shelters while other states yearn for these lap dogs

By Kyra Kirkwood

THEY MAY BE LITTLE, but the problems these dogs face are huge. Chihuahuas have become a very popular animal in California — not in homes, but in animal shelters. Between 30 to 50 percent of shelters' populations are now comprised of this diminutive breed with the over-the-top personality. This nearly — and, in some cases, totally — overshadows the one-time record holder, the Pit Bull. Chihuahuas are now literally packed into animal shelters across the state.

In 2009, 4,700 Chihuahuas entered the

Los Angeles city shelter system — 1,000 more than in the previous year. In San Francisco, animal control officials fear Chihuahuas will account for half of the shelter population in a few months. That's already happened in Oakland, where Chihuahuas and Chihuahua mixes totaled up half of East Bay SPCA's population in December.

But why? Why California? Why is the Chihuahua population explosion now in red-level crisis status here, and not elsewhere? And what's being done about it?



WHAT CAUSED THE CRISIS

“Whatever goes on in one place, it’s in excess out here,” said Madeline Bernstein, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Los Angeles (spcaLA). “We’re like trends on steroids.”

A large finger of blame is pointed straight at Hollywood. From Paris Hilton to Britney Spears, celebrities are seen toting Chihuahuas and other small dogs in their purses or on their arms like jewelry to red-carpet events. We’re not talking about the folks who are photographed walking their dogs in the park. No, the ones that the rescue world takes issue with are those who use these pups like personal fashion statements. If Hollywood icons and fashionistas are sporting the newest version of “Chihuahua couture,” others follow. A trend — misguided and damaging, say animal advocates — is born.

“They are giving people the wrong idea about these dogs,” said Tiffanie Hauger, an independent Chihuahua rescuer from Sherman Oaks, Calif. “Chihuahuas are living beings, not an accessory like a purse! So many young girls across the country run to pet stores and buy Chihuahuas so they can be like Paris Hilton, and when they realize it’s actually a dog that pees, poops, barks and behaves like an animal, not a stuffed toy, they can’t handle it and the dog gets dumped in the shelter.”

Then we’ve got Hollywood’s by-product: the movies. *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* and *Legally Blonde*, to name two, are being blamed in part for this crisis. Children see movies like these and want a dog like the one on the big screen. Parents give in and get the family a Chihuahua. When the dog isn’t perfect or good with children, the dog gets dumped.

This phenomenon is nothing new. Look at what happened to the Dalmatians after all of the *101 Dalmatians* films hit theaters, or the Pugs when *Men In Black* became the newest summer blockbuster. People saw these dog actors looking and behaving preciously, and they fell in love with the breed. They thought with their hearts, not heads, leading to impulsive buying and poor choices. Without much research on the breed, many people purchased these readily available

dogs like toasters ... and dumped them just as easily. Shelters became overrun with Dalmatians and Pugs before the blockbuster movies even hit DVD players. Chihuahuas are following suit, even though there’s not one specific movie to blame for this explosion. It may have started with the famous “Yo quiero Taco Bell” Chihuahua who turned the fast-food chain’s commercials into pop culture, but it kept growing from there.

Unscrupulous breeders and puppy mills also shoulder the blame for California’s Chihuahua crisis. To say these dogs are overbred is an epic understatement. Too often, people dabble in breeding Chihuahuas to make a fast dollar — and a big dollar at that. A popular breed in its heyday can rake in hundreds of dollars per dog without much of an investment. Unethical breeders just see dollar signs. They don’t research the intricacies of breeding, nor do they try to find ideal genetic matches. They just pair any “cute” male with an “adorable” female and hope to pay for their next summer vacation with the result.

“People who think they can make a profit by breeding their pets and selling the puppies don’t realize what a myth this is,” said Jennifer Warner, Adopt-a-Pet.com director of shelter outreach. “Typically, vet costs outweigh any profits. Pregnancy complications, especially with dogs this small, mean there’s a good chance the pups and mom won’t survive. Since the market is flooded, people are left with unwanted puppies.”

Then there are the puppy mills. While backyard breeders may be at fault for being ignorant, puppy mills are at fault for being cruel. Basically, these ventures use dogs as breeding factories, pumping out litter after litter until the dog is physically depleted. The dogs are kept in horrid living conditions (think rabbit hutches) and treated more like machines than living creatures. Many invest-

tigations by The Humane Society of the United States have shown that nearly all dogs found for sale in pet stores come from puppy mills. Too often, these dogs suffer long-term physical, mental and behavioral issues. Those unexpected vet or trainer bills can overwhelm unprepared owners both emotionally and financially, leading to the dogs being abandoned at shelters. They may be cute, but when the workload overshadows adorability, the dogs are often relinquished.

We can blame Hollywood, celebrities, puppy mills and the guy selling Chihuahua puppies out of a cardboard box on the corner. Although many responsible and educated Chihuahua guardians got their dogs after much homework and evaluation, many other people have purchased a Chihuahua without any in-depth research into the breed. At the end of the day, the focus of California’s latest canine crisis goes back to many of the misguided people who buy these Chihuahuas to begin with, say the breed’s advocates.

People see tiny bodies, big eyes, and the ability to stuff them in purses and take them anywhere. They figure Chihuahuas are adorable, low-maintenance pets that work well in apartments and condos. Eager Chihuahua owners assume since Chihuahuas are small, they don’t eat much, don’t take up much space, and don’t need as much attention. “For some people, there’s just something about the ‘perpetual puppy,’” said Bernstein. “That’s part of the allure.”

But reality soon sets in. And the reality is that Chihuahuas bark (sometimes a lot, and at anything), require a financial commitment, are prone to certain medical issues like tracheal collapse and seizures, are notoriously difficult to house-train, need constant training, and demand just as much work as a big dog does. When real life hits and the novelty of having a “toy” runs out (usually at the time the Chihuahua begins acting like a dog instead of a stuffed animal), people lose interest, say rescuers.

Yet even guardians with the best intentions can get overwhelmed by their dogs. John Van Zante, spokesperson for the Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., states that all too often, people refuse to properly train their Chihuahuas because “they’re so small.” What results is a tyrant of a dog that’s surrendered to an animal shelter when the guardian can’t deal with the behavioral problems anymore.

“I think that the lack of discipline is a major factor,” said Van Zante, explaining that Chihuahuas need to be given obedience training just like any other dog. “A dog of any size ... needs to learn and follow the house rules.”

Given all the circumstances that have contributed to the suffering of Chihuahuas, the solutions seem much more difficult to execute than identify. “There is no one easy fix,” said Warner. “But there

are many things that can be done, and together, they could fix not only the Chihuahua crisis, but the nationwide pet overpopulation crisis.”

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Many animal organizations are dealing with the Chihuahua overpopulation problem by transporting these small dogs out of overcrowded California shelters to other parts of the country where a small dog may be hard to find.

“You would do this if you were in any other business,” said Bernstein. “Why not bring the supply to the demand? The tools are there.”

These transports are often made possible due to volunteers, fundraising efforts, private donors, and the cooperation and communication between various shelters and rescue groups.

In December 2009, nearly 70 small dogs left sunny Southern California’s shelters and headed toward the chilly East Coast to places like Humane Society for Greater Nashua in New Hampshire,

where more than 100 people waited for one of these dogs. It’s reported that all of the 25 Chihuahuas in the first delivery were adopted within a single day. Rescue group Kinder4Rescue and Grey’s Anatomy actress Katherine Heigl, who co-founded the Jason Debus Heigl Foundation, helped make this transport a reality. But there are many other rescue groups, private donors and commercial



spcaLA Chihuahua airlift with Pet Airways. Left to right: Alyse Tagnotti, Pilot Casey Martin, Judy Taninies, Madeline Bernstein, and Steven Hanson.

in Los Angeles get adopted in Utah since 2008, thanks in part to a cooperative effort between the Jason Debus Heigl Foundation, Best Friends LA and the Humane Society of Utah (HSU). Approximately 30 small dogs, many on death row for overcrowding reasons, make the 625-mile trek from Los Angeles shelters to arrive at HSU every two weeks. HSU’s goal is to rescue at least 800 small dogs and get them adopted this year.

When rescue organizations like these adopt out Chihuahuas, it not only saves lives but helps put backyard breeders and puppy mills out of business. When people are choosing to adopt Chihuahua’s first, overpopulation problems caused by these booming businesses are eventually decreased.

While airlifts and car transports are doing so much to stem this Chihuahua crisis, there are even more things being done at a grassroots level. Many Chihuahua rescue groups are advocating spaying and neutering in addition to adoption.

“Pet owners who can afford to get their pets fixed need to get it done before their pets ever have a chance to breed,” said Warner. “The two most common excuses I hear for not fixing a pet are ‘he never gets out,’ or ‘I just want them to have one litter.’ Accidents happen — 25 percent of stray dogs in shelters are reclaimed by owners who didn’t mean for their pets to get out. And even ‘just one lit-

ter’ means that same number of dogs will be put to sleep in a shelter, that same number of homes that are not adopting.” For people who are unable to afford the surgery, there are many low- and no-cost spay/neuter programs through various organizations that are willing to help.

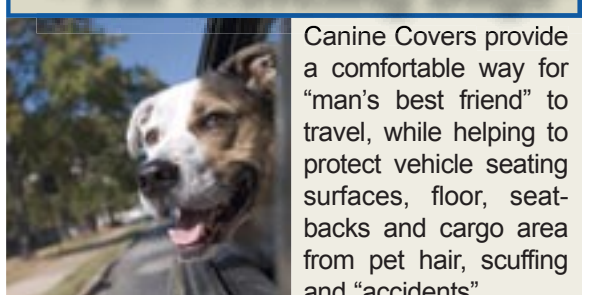
Rescue groups are also doubling efforts to educate the public about the breed. “Adopters should be screened and these dogs should be placed into the right homes, not just a home,” Hauger said. “Many times, a home with small children isn’t the right home. Chihuahuas are amazing little dogs. But they are not for everyone, just like a German Shepherd isn’t for everyone. It’s the responsibility of the rescue group to make sure a dog is matched with the right home.”

When the right dog is matched with the right guardian who has done the research, a great pair is born. Thoughtful pairings mean less unwanted dogs surrendered to shelters and less strain on the shelter overpopulation problem. The same rule applies to spaying and neutering. Stopping too many of these dogs from being born in the first place is key to slowing the surplus in California shelters.



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“For Traveling Dogs”

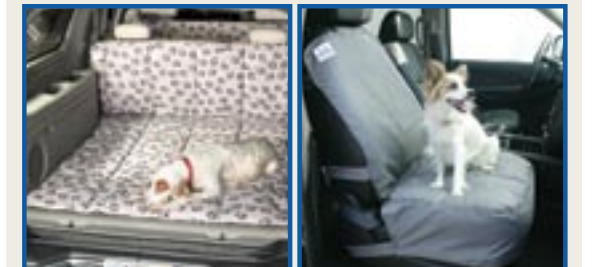


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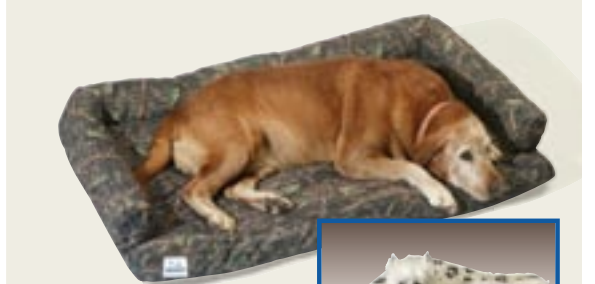
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» **DONATE \$10** to an organization that will pay for a spay/neuter surgery.

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