

Petland corporate store found covering up disease outbreaks – an undercover investigation by the Humane Society of the United States

HSUS secret shopper purchased underweight puppy with contagious campylobacter infection; six human cases of the same illness were linked to the same store this year

An undercover investigation by the Humane Society of the United States at the Florence, Kentucky, Petland store resulted in our investigator becoming sick with a campylobacter infection, a bacterial illness that the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the state health department have linked to contact with puppies in Petland stores. Our investigator’s illness was at least the sixth human illness linked to the Florence store this year, according to records HSUS obtained from the Kentucky Health Department. At least two of the people who became sick after having contact with puppies from the store, which is owned by Petland, Inc., had to be hospitalized, according to state documents.

And although Petland’s leadership was informed of the known human campylobacter cases linked to the Florence store, our hidden cameras found the store was still failing to test or properly treat puppies with [symptoms of the disease](#), which can cause stomach pain, fever, nausea, diarrhea and bloody stools in both pets and people.

In fact, when an HSUS secret shopper purchased a puppy, whom we named Jasper, with obvious diarrhea on Oct. 25, 2019, a Petland manager assured our buyer that the puppy was healthy and that his diarrhea was simply due to stress. The manager told our puppy buyer on hidden camera, “this puppy has had diarrhea [but]



A merle goldendoodle puppy (later named Jasper) arrived at the store from an Ohio distributor on Sept. 26, 2019. He was underweight and suffered from frequent diarrhea for weeks, but Petland didn’t provide adequate care for his illness. / HSUS, 2019.

that’s not campylobacter,” adding that our buyer would have “.002% chance of getting campylobacter from a puppy from here.”

The manager also told our buyer that the puppy had had a fecal test to ensure he was healthy. Yet Petland did not provide any proof of a fecal test, let alone a test with a normal result. In fact, our investigator, a different HSUS employee who had been working undercover in the store, documented that the puppy had been sick in the store with the same symptoms for weeks, even though he was sold to HSUS’s buyer as healthy.

Despite telling our buyer that Jasper’s diarrhea was “not campylobacter” and that her chances of getting the disease from a puppy were a fraction of one percent, the same manager told our undercover employee days later that they do not test most of the puppies in the store for the disease because most of them would test positive for campylobacter.

Immediately upon purchasing the puppy, HSUS took him to an Ohio veterinarian who is not affiliated with Petland. The veterinarian told us Jasper was “skin and bones” and that both his bloodwork and the abnormal appearance of his stool indicated parasites. Test results of samples taken that day showed he was positive not only for campylobacter but for giardia– two diseases that can cause miserable symptoms, and that can be passed on to people as well as pets.

The Petland store’s failure to obtain professional veterinary care for Jasper after he became ill is extremely concerning. Florence’s animal care ordinance requires commercial animal establishments to “provide proper medical treatment from a veterinarian



Puppies arrived at the Florence Petland store in crowded vans with Ohio and Missouri plates. / HSUS, 2019.

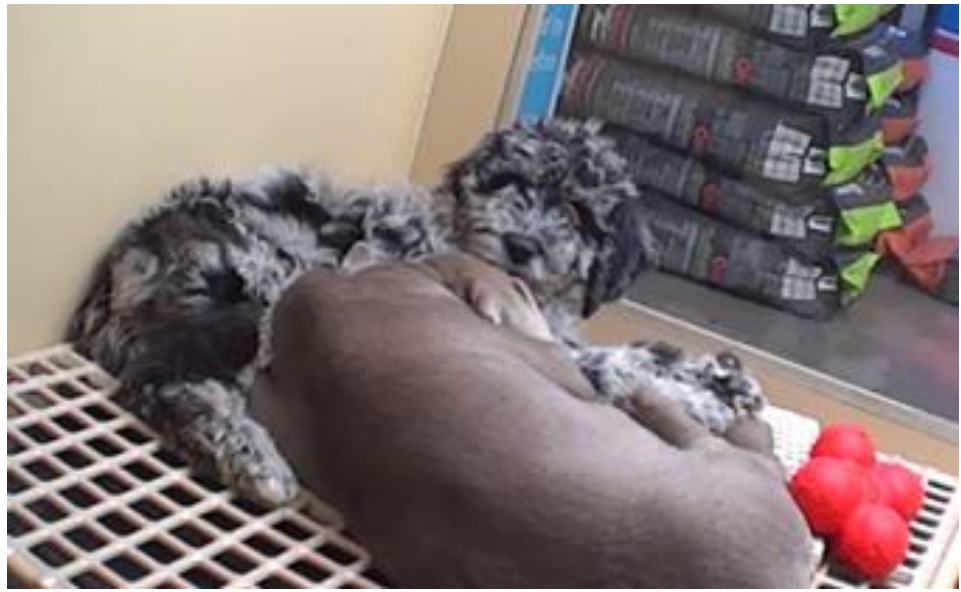
for sick or injured animals¹.” HSUS investigators reported our concerns to local law enforcement and provided detailed documentation and video footage.

¹ Florence, Kentucky, [Municipal Code § 91.87](#). A violation of 91.87 is grounds for revocation of the store’s operating license. *Id.* at 91.89.

Puppies at the Florence Petland had multiple serious and preventable diseases; some puppies died

Campylobacter was not the only disease harming Petland’s puppies. During the time HSUS’s undercover investigator worked at the Florence Petland, from September 11 to October 25, there were rampant issues with contagious diseases in the store, including some puppies who were sick for weeks without being taken to a veterinarian, and some who did go to the hospital, but not until it was too late to save them. Highly contagious diseases such as canine distemper and parvovirus – which would normally be prevented by the appropriate puppy vaccines – resulted in the deaths of several puppies while our investigator worked at the store. Instead of warning customers, Petland managers told employees to keep silent about the disease outbreaks, and sometimes kept staff in the dark about the breadth of the outbreaks. Instead, supervisors instructed Petland’s kennel staff to enhance their cleaning protocols, and at one point even placed signs on the puppies’ cages falsely telling shoppers that the animals had just arrived and could not be handled yet.

In one heartbreaking incident, two puppies had to be euthanized due to deadly canine distemper, and at least three other puppies who had potentially been exposed to distemper were quietly moved to a new Indiana Petland store in the dark of night. Other dogs who had potentially been exposed to distemper were sent “back to their breeders” – or so the Petland employees were told – and were never seen again. The movement of potentially sick puppies across state lines could spread the disease even further.



An HSUS secret shopper purchased “Jasper” on Oct. 25, 2019, after our undercover investigator told us he had been sick for weeks without adequate treatment. A veterinarian who saw Jasper that day found Jasper to be very underweight. He tested positive for giardia and campylobacter, two diseases that are contagious to humans. / HSUS, 2019.

At the same time, many puppies suffered from loose, watery or bloody stools, which can be a symptom of many serious diseases, including parvovirus and campylobacter infections, but many were not taken to a veterinarian for testing to root out the cause.

Starting in mid-October, HSUS's own investigator started to suffer from gastrointestinal issues as well. When the symptoms did not clear up on their own, the investigator went to an urgent care center for treatment on October 19.

After our undercover investigator reported seeing puppies suffer from miserable symptoms in the store for weeks, HSUS decided to intervene and sent another employee as a secret shopper to purchase Jasper, a blue merle goldendoodle puppy, on October 25. Jasper was rarely eating and suffering from near-constant diarrhea. It appears he was never taken to a veterinary hospital for treatment for his diarrhea while in Petland's care, even though his stool sometimes appeared to contain blood or mucus. According to our undercover investigator, he was only observed to have been examined by a veterinarian one time during his three weeks in the store – a perfunctory exam that lasted only 45 seconds. The 45 second examination was a routine intake examination when he first arrived at the store, not the thorough examination that Petland seems to imply in their sales pitches and on their website, where they declare that “healthy pets are our number one priority².” When HSUS purchased Jasper, he had been in the store for about a month and was on sale to the public for \$4,200.

After we purchased Jasper, we had him examined at Rascal Veterinary Hospital³ that same day. The hospital's owner, Dr. Michelle Gonzalez, DVM, determined he had a body score of only 2 out of 9 (a normal body score is 5). She described him as “skin and bones” under his curly coat. Pet store staff told our secret shopper that Jasper was healthy and had been seen by the store veterinarian “every week,” but our undercover investigator reported that to the best of their knowledge, the store's veterinarian only examined him one time, during the 45-second intake “examination.”

Also on October 25, HSUS's investigator received the results of the test conducted at the urgent care center. The results were positive for campylobacter infection. The investigator immediately started antibiotics. When the investigator returned to the store a few days later to report their illness to the general manager, the general manager revealed that she herself and other employees had dealt with campylobacter infections before, but she seemed largely unconcerned. The manager indicated that spraying fecal matter off the cage trays while laughing or talking sometimes causes fecal particles to be inhaled or swallowed by the employees, resulting in illness. She offered to give our investigator a mask to wear while cleaning diarrhea off the puppies' trays, which seemed an inadequate and belated solution.

During the same conversation, the general manager claimed that any puppy they tested would tend to test positive for campylobacter, and that's why the store's veterinarian told them they “can't do anything” about the disease except urge people to wash their hands. An employee training video that the store apparently shows to all Petland employees also downplayed the risks, again focusing on hand washing, not better veterinary care, as a primary way to avoid infection. But the video also displayed a chart showing different abnormal puppy stools the video said could indicate a need for veterinary care. Our investigator never saw the

² Per www.petland.com/about/petland-cares, last accessed on 11/8/19

³ Rascal Veterinary Hospital is in Dublin, Ohio.

chart being used nor any stool samples preserved for testing, even when puppies in the store had profuse, ongoing bloody diarrhea.

After reporting their illness to the general manager, the HSUS investigator took time off to recover. The investigator did not return to the store.

A canine distemper outbreak hidden from the public

When the HSUS investigator first started working at the store in September, a different outbreak was underway. They were taught to clean cages by spraying down the puppy kennels with bleach after first using a disinfectant. The investigator was concerned about using something so strong around very young puppies, but they were told that the protocol was “[only] for this week.” When a customer brought in her very sick Yorkie, the investigator began to realize there was a reason for the exceptionally stringent disinfecting.

Two days later, the HSUS investigator was informed that customers could not interact with any puppies in the store until test results for three puppies suspected of having canine distemper– the customer’s sick Yorkie, a very



A very sick puppy in the Florence Petland store was finally taken to the veterinarian, but never returned. Investigators suspected he was taken much too late and did not survive. / HSUS, 2019.

sick Pekingese and a husky – were provided by the store’s veterinarian. Petland had already euthanized a goldendoodle puppy the prior week who tested positive for distemper, according to staff.

The store put signs on the puppies’ cages reading, “I’ve just arrived and can’t wait until my doctor says I can come out and play!”. The truth was that the puppies hadn’t just arrived; instead, they had all been potentially exposed to distemper – a highly contagious canine disease that kills most of its victims after causing enormous suffering. If a puppy survives distemper, he or she is likely to suffer neurological damage for the rest of their

life.⁴ And store visitors who touched or played with the puppies could bring that illness home to their own pets. Yet Petland kept the outbreak a secret.

Canine distemper can easily be prevented in puppies who are properly vaccinated. But as one employee told our undercover investigator on camera, she believed the breeder who provided some of the puppies had “stopped vaccinating” their dogs. In a store that intermingles dozens of dogs from different breeders in close proximity, this could mean many more animals were exposed to the deadly disease.

When the test results came back for the customer’s sick Yorkie, it was terrible news – the puppy was positive for canine distemper. The puppy was euthanized by Petland’s veterinarian. The results for the Pekingese and husky were also positive for distemper.⁵ The HSUS investigator never saw these puppies again after they left the store for their tests, and was alarmed when a coworker said that all the puppies in the store would be sent “back to their breeders.” The investigator wondered what breeders would do with puppies who had been exposed to distemper. They could infect other puppies back at the breeding establishment, and any transporters carrying the dogs back to the breeders, which were in other states, including Ohio, Missouri and Iowa, could also become contaminated and could spread the illness to other animals – a common reason why pet store puppies are so prone to illness.

On the fourth day of our investigation, the HSUS investigator found empty kennels upon arriving at the store, and was told that all the puppies had been sent back to the breeders except eight puppies– all of whom had been exposed to the distemper-positive puppies and all of whom were now in the isolation room.

Despite the outbreak of distemper, 35 new puppies were ordered for arrival on Monday and Tuesday of the following week. Meanwhile, customers who asked about the store’s now-missing puppies were told that the store was just doing an annual cleaning, when in fact the animals had been moved out of sight because they might be sick. A sign placed on the cages on September 19 read, “Annual kennel maintenance – Puppies coming soon!” Shoppers were not warned about the store’s exposure to disease, and our investigator saw and heard no evidence that the store reached out to recent puppy buyers to warn them their new dogs may have been exposed as well.

One of the kennel technicians told the HSUS investigator that salespeople in the store “messed up” by telling customers the distemper-exposed puppies would be available again after their “annual checkup,” when the puppies were never coming back to the store. Another worker told the HSUS investigator that at the Florence store, “there’s a lot of stuff we don’t know,” indicating that staff members felt they were sometimes kept in the dark about diseases or the outcomes for sick puppies. On yet another occasion, a Petland salesperson told our investigator, “I’m not allowed to know” about test results on sick puppies – indicating that Petland

⁴ <https://www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/Canine-Distemper.aspx>

⁵ According to staff conversations documented by HSUS’s undercover investigator.

sometimes concealed disease outbreaks even from its own staff as a way of keeping information from leaking to the public.

During the same conversation with coworkers, the HSUS investigator also learned that the first puppy to show signs of distemper – a mini goldendoodle – had been left in the window, available for public interaction, for “quite a while” before being moved into the store’s Special Care Center (Petland’s hidden isolation room) and later euthanized.

One of the kennel techs said, “[I] would never get a puppy here.” Yet puppies at the store were offered at very high prices, with many selling for over \$4,000 and some as high as \$14,000.

Puppies from large commercial breeders that sell to pet stores often have genetic defects, and many suffer from contagious diseases

because of improper or ad-hoc veterinary care, and because their brand-new immune systems are no match for the dirty and crowded conditions at puppy mills. The puppies’ immune systems are also stressed by days on long transports as they are moved by brokers (distributors) to pet stores on crowded vehicles, where they are exposed to many other puppies who might be sick. During our investigation, several tiny puppies were sent back to the breeders due to a variety of ailments, including several who had open fontanels – openings in the skull that could increase the risk of brain injury.



After HSUS purchased Jasper and a veterinarian administered appropriate treatment, he gained three pounds in less than a week. / HSUS, 2019.

Jasper was put up for sale while suffering from two different infectious diseases

When HSUS sent our secret shopper to purchase Jasper on October 25, Petland’s salesperson and the manager declared the puppy was ‘perfectly healthy’ and ‘very healthy’ respectively. Even when the puppy soiled the floor with bloody diarrhea right in front of our secret shopper, Petland’s manager told our buyers that the diarrhea was just due to stress, and specifically stated, “that’s not campylobacter.” When pressed, the manager claimed the puppy’s stool had already been tested, but HSUS could find no record of a stool test ever being performed on the puppy, even when we called Petland’s veterinarian days later to request a copy of the results.

As soon as Jasper arrived at our independent veterinarian's facility, and was properly tested and put on appropriate medications, the veterinarian, Dr. Michelle Gonzalez, reported that his stool became firm, his appetite came back, and he began gaining weight. He gained about 3 pounds in five days. Jasper's response to the appropriate medications as well as his test results indicate he was suffering from an acute illness, and that his weeks of sickness and weight loss could have been avoided if Petland had sought professional treatment when his symptoms first appeared.

After more than two weeks in the hospital, Jasper moved to a foster home, where he continues to improve.

HSUS's investigation of the Florence Petland store shows that Petland's problems with sick and suffering animals, and its failures to adequately address disease outbreaks, are not limited to a few rogue franchises. The corporate store's cover-ups of disease outbreaks, its sale of sick dogs, and its failure to provide professional veterinary care to puppies who were sick for weeks is very similar to the deficiencies we identified [in other investigations](#) in Petland franchise stores in seven other locations in six states.

If pet stores like Petland stopped selling puppies, many breeding dogs in puppy mills would be relieved of their years-long suffering, and puppies born to these breeders would not be shipped hundreds of miles in trucks that can be hot-beds of viral and bacterial infections. Suffering would end for tens of thousands of dogs used by the pet industry.

To get a healthy puppy from a humane source, the HSUS recommends visiting an animal shelter or reputable pet rescue as the kindest option. If buying a breeder puppy, never purchase from a pet store or internet site; responsible breeders want to meet the families who are taking home their puppies. Responsible breeders breed only a few animals at a time, and they don't sell through a middleman or to people they haven't met. For more information about getting a puppy from a humane source, see humanesociety.org/puppy.

Timeline of Jasper's and investigator's illnesses

9/26/19: The merle goldendoodle puppy arrived at the Florence, Kentucky Petland store on a broker van from "Preferred Canines" in Ohio. Paperwork showed he came from a breeder in Ohio named David Wengerd.

9/27/19: Jasper received a 45-second intake examination at Petland from its affiliated veterinarian, who visited the store to examine the new puppies. HSUS's undercover investigator filmed the examination from start to finish. It lasted under a minute and no stool sample was taken.

10/7/19: Staff noticed Jasper was very thin, according to the HSUS investigator. The puppy was not gaining weight and had whitish material in his diarrhea. Staff separated the dog for mealtime to make sure he ate, demonstrating that they were aware he was unwell.

- 10/8/19: Our undercover employee hand-fed Jasper to try to get him to eat more, as it was well known among the kennel staff that he was thin and rarely ate. He was still suffering from ongoing diarrhea. Pumpkin and probiotics were added to his food, but he was not taken back to the veterinarian.
- 10/9/19: Our undercover investigator asked Petland's kennel staff about Jasper's diarrhea. They were told that he was just skinny and that his diarrhea was caused by stress. There was no indication that a stool sample was provided to the store's veterinarian for testing.
- 10/10/19: The undercover investigator observed that the puppy still had a lot of diarrhea with what appeared to be blood and mucus mixed in his stool.
- 10/16/19: The puppy still had profuse diarrhea and was still up for sale. He was marked down 25%. At around this time, HSUS's investigator began to experience stomach upset, too.
- 10/18/19: Jasper was still being separated during feeding time to encourage him to eat more. Staff were aware that he still had a poor appetite.
- 10/19/19: HSUS's investigator went to urgent care because of ongoing gastrointestinal distress. The urgent care center sent the investigator's samples to a lab for testing the following day.
- 10/22/19: The undercover investigator and other Petland staff noticed Jasper still had liquid diarrhea. On this day, it was smeared all over the floor and walls and Jasper was soiled and required a bath. Our investigator again asked an employee what could be done about his diarrhea. The employee said it was just stress and that sometimes de-wormers cause animals to have blood in their stool.
- 10/25/19: Jasper was still for sale to the public and was still suffering from bloody diarrhea. HSUS sent an employee as a secret shopper into the store to purchase him. The puppy had bloody diarrhea right in front of our secret shopper. Nevertheless, our hidden camera recorded both the sales staff and manager telling our secret shopper the puppy was healthy. When the shopper asked if the puppy had had a stool sample tested, the manager claimed that he had, and that Petland's veterinarian had the record⁶. After paying nearly \$4,000 for the puppy, our secret shopper took him straight to a veterinarian.

On the same day, October 25, HSUS's undercover investigator received their test results from the laboratory. The investigator tested positive for campylobacter infection. They were the second HSUS investigator to become ill with campylobacter after working undercover at a Petland store in 2019. To protect their health, the investigator did not return to work at the store.

Our veterinarian said Jasper was "skin and bones," likely as a result of his nausea and diarrhea, and that his bloodwork and the appearance of his stool indicated parasites. She sent Jasper's samples to a

⁶ Our investigator called Petland's veterinarian the following week and was told they could not find any record of a fecal test on Jasper.

laboratory. In the meantime, he was immediately put on medication for suspected gastrointestinal parasites.

10/29/19: Independent lab results revealed that Jasper tested positive for giardia and campylobacter, two contagious diseases which could explain the diarrhea and poor appetite that he suffered from for weeks at Petland, and that our investigator was exposed to. By the time the test results came in, Jasper had been on medication for several days. He had already gained three pounds and his diarrhea almost immediately improved.