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Life-lift for dogs is fatal, 100+ die



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More than 100 rescued dogs from Puerto Rico died in Florida after they were sent there for adoption, it was learned Monday.

Unfortunately the effort to give them new lives in the states backfired, as several young puppies died of two of the most deadly and contagious canine illnesses -- distemper and parvovirus.

The information was made public locally over the Puerto Rico Animal Forum, and the Puerto Rico Forum for Animal Rights.

Apparently, according to some Florida sources, the illness spread with lightning-like speed from only one dog who was infected. Vaccinations at an early age can prevent this illness, but many epidemics get started in dogs too young to be inoculated.

The Florida Veterinary Medical Association, which was called in along with the University of Florida veterinarians, said that 115 of the 222 dogs in the adoption airlift are still alive and have a chance of recovering and being adopted.

At last count, 107 Puerto Rican dogs had died, according to a story by Larry Clifton in the Sumter County Times on Sept. 30. Sixty recovering dogs had been sheltered by veterinarians and at least 20 had been adopted in Florida. The animals had been en route to Yonkers, N.Y., to be offered for adoption in several PetSmart stores, but ultimately all the survivors remained in Florida.

The dogs from Puerto Rico had been offered four days in the air-conditioned warehouse in Bushnell, Fla., by Ronnie and Linda Graves, founders of Sumter Disaster Animal Response Team. When the dogs arrived sick, the Graves immediately had them quarantined and spent between \$50,000 and \$75,000 on their health.

The entire cost, the Florida Veterinary Medical Association estimated, was \$185,000.

The hurried removal of the dogs to Orlando on a cargo plane from Puerto Rico was made Aug. 28, the day before Hurricane Earl was set to hit the island. They were picked up by volunteers at the airport to be taken to an air-conditioned warehouse to await transfer to New York.

Puerto Rican mixed-breed dogs, called ITAL satos ITAL, have been shipped to the states for many years by a variety of organizations. The airlines cooperated by offering free transportation, but in recent years, many of these opportunities have diminished. There is always a stateside market for small breeds from the tropics, because sterilization campaigns there have cut into the number of small dogs available for adoption. In Puerto Rico, due to the lack of homes for mixed breed canines, many unwanted puppies are abandoned to die on the streets, or euthanized in the few animal shelters. Several private rescue groups have sprung up which have taken in many of these dogs, and a smaller number of cats, and found homes for them both locally and abroad. This visible rehabilitation action has sometimes given the idea that the government does not have to do anything and that the animal overpopulation is under control.

Ironically, the rush to save this large number of dogs was part of an effort by Puerto Rico Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), an Isabela rescue organization, to earn \$125,000 to help homeless and abandoned animals. They were one of 50 shelters throughout the U.S. competing for a national award from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, better known as the ASPCA.

Winners of the contest would receive \$100,000 and a second grant of \$25,000 to be awarded to the shelter with largest adoption participation. The goal was to challenge shelters nationwide to save a minimum of 300 more cats and dogs from Aug. 1 through Oct. 31 than they had done in the same period last year. As of Friday, PAWS was listed in 27th position, out of 700 shelters which had applied. The number of "lives saved" is to be updated on Oct. 12.

Veterinarian Gwen Davis, head of PAWS, was not immediately available for comment.

The Second Chance for Love adopt-a-thon was held on the weekend of Sept. 10-12, with a goal of 19,600. Last year, they found homes for 15,933 dogs, cats and smaller animals, somewhat behind their goal of 18,500. The Puerto Rico animals never reached the adoption event, and gave up any chance of being awarded the grant which might have helped thousands more homeless island animals.

According to a report by Brenda Eggert Brader, spokeswoman for the Association, the Puerto Rican dogs were required to arrive disease free, at least 4 months old and under 10 pounds in weight. However, they ranged in age from 4 weeks to over 1 year, and several were over 10 pounds.

Many of the puppies still had their eyes closed and were only a few weeks open, volunteers observed.

It was not established how many of the animals were infected and when or how the illness started to spread.

Since Aug. 30, the volunteers in Bushnell and a few veterinarians have battled to contain the deadly epidemic.

All animals had reportedly been vaccinated and wormed in Puerto Rico. However, fecal exams showed that many dogs, particularly the youngest puppies, also had parasite infestations of coccidia, roundworm, and hookworm, many of these also deadly, according to the FVMA report. As of Sept. 22, the report said, there were 53 healthy dogs. Transported to the Florida SPCA in Orlando, 20 have already been adopted from that location.

Thirty-three of the youngest puppies testing positive for distemper but clinically well were accepted by six veterinarians in central Florida who offered to put them in isolation until they recover, according to the FVMA report. Twenty-nine more dogs infected with distemper were accepted in isolation in another city.

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elizabeth miller

re: Life-lift for dogs is fatal, 100+ die

Posted: October 5, 2010

Transportation by air to rescue animals in hopes of adopting is at best even with full vaccinations, testing and individual attention very stressful. Too much emphasis on this grant and money caused this disaster and loss of life not to mention the suffering of these animals.

Any animal too young to be vaccinated should not be transported anywhere. Lack of quarantine and numbers transported was outrageous. Many healthy vaccinated and quarantined animals waiting for adoption may lose their opportunity to travel due to this poor planning disaster and press.

"Saving" animals is not just removing them from one place to another temporary holding place in another city or state. Congratulations to those veterinarians, people and shelters who cared for the sick ones. God Bless those lives lost.. Hopefully this will be a lesson NEVER to be repeated.

Penny Miller Vieques Island, Puerto Rico
viequeshumanesocietyandanimalrescue.org

Desia A Ritson

re: Life-lift for dogs is fatal, 100+ die

Posted: October 5, 2010

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