

Puppy Mill Pick-Up

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The rescue dogs in the Stop The Suffering van, ready to be unloaded on Wednesday, April 9, 2025. Taken by Olivia Hoffman.

A large, white van decorated with swirls of blue and pink sits in the driveway of a Columbus house. From inside comes a cacophony of barks and whines.

The two side doors part to show stacks of black crates containing dogs of all shapes, sizes, colors and ages.

Two dozen pairs of eyes all look right at me as I approach, then to each subsequent noise or movement.

For many of them, this is likely their first travel experience. Their wide eyes, tucked tails and tongue flicks show that they're frightened, but little do they know that they are actually being saved.

Keegan Murphy rescues unwanted dogs from puppy mills in Ohio for the rescue "Stop The Suffering." The majority of Ohio's high-volume dog breeding licenses are owned within Amish communities, to which Murphy has traveled every Wednesday and Thursday for many years to save the dogs and puppies they no longer want or need and would otherwise be euthanized.

This Wednesday, 24 dogs are piled into Murphy's van.

She just returned to Columbus from Amish country, which includes counties such as Holmes, Coshocton, Tuscarawas and Knox, where 83% of Ohio's breeding licenses are located.

Dog breeding has become a huge industry among Amish communities, and Murphy says the conditions vary a lot, but often lean toward being unhealthy and unethical for their animals.

"I think of it as more of a cultural difference than a moral difference," said Murphy. "Some people want to say they're horrible people, but they're just people. This is what they were raised to think is okay."

She and her teammate, Danielle David, picked up each dog either from the veterinarian that the breeder gave them to or directly from the breeder.

The two now prepare to bring the dogs to their foster parent or a shelter, Louie's Legacy, which has its van parked on the street ready to transport the dogs to their shelter in Cincinnati.

First, they unload the largest of the bunch, and the surprise of the bunch.

"We weren't expecting this guy to be there today," says Murphy, gesturing to the giant 7-year-old Burmese dog shaking in his enclosure.

It takes some encouragement to get the fluffy creature to hop down from the van to the pavement, but he stumbles out and walks, with slow steps and suspiciously eyeing his surroundings.

"How many times do you think he's been on a leash?" I inquire.

David replies, "Today."

Once the first is loaded in the shelter van, another Burmese is next. This is a 3-year-old female. She hops down quickly, but pauses before the next van. She refuses to budge as the leash is gently tugged, eventually needing to be picked up.

The older dogs, ranging from three to seven years, are likely dogs who were bred until they were deemed unable or unfit to continue.

For example, Murphy picked up three floppy-eared cocker spaniels, two females and a male, who are all 7-years-old. One of the grey-colored females has been whining and pawing at the bars of her crate while watching the Burmese dogs move below her. Now she is carried to meet them at the van.

The second female, with a dark-grey coat and white spots, David carries wearing large protective gloves, just in case of a fearful bite. The dog whines whenever Murphy or David touches her front legs, and they fear she may have been injured by the breeder who owned her before.

"The vet said the breeder pulled her by her legs to make her walk," Murphy recalls. They take note of the dog's reaction, and are extra gentle with the elderly spaniel.

These spaniels may be the oldest, but the youngest is only 9-weeks-old. This puppy is a cockapoo, a mix of a cocker spaniel and a poodle. This puppy is here so young because she has a flaw that makes her unsellable from a breeder's perspective: she's missing one eye.

The brown, shaggy puppy is not much larger than David's two hands holding her. She stays still and quiet as she's picked up and brought to her crate in the shelter van.

Next is a crate with a bichon frise female, a cavalier female and a mini poodle female. All are around 6-years-old. The white bichon and the tan mini poodle are shaved, missing their breeds' signature curls.

"Sometimes the breeders shave the dogs before we get them so we don't see how messy they were," Murphy comments.

Next, a 4-year-old Boxer male is freed from his cramped crate, a little too small for his boxer bulk.

This guy is going straight to his foster home. With some treats and a helping hand, he gets from the van to the ground, and is led smoothly to the minivan that will take him to his foster mom's home.

There's one goldendoodle puppy, only she's not so golden. She's completely black and curly like a poodle. At only 11-weeks-old, it's suspected that the puppy's dark complexion led her to be unwanted.

Next is a litter of nine puppies that are half goldendoodle and half Burmese. These babies are also black and curly, showing little of their "golden" side. However, their Burmese side is clear, because, despite being fairly small now, their big paws show that they'll grow into those Burmese genes.

"I think these ones might have been an oopsie," said David, commenting on the odd mix of a goldendoodle and Burmese. Perhaps this mix was undesirable for selling as well, hence the entire litter being given up.

These puppies also made a bit of a mess. On the over two-hour drive to Columbus, they managed to defecate and get sick all over the newspaper (and each other) in their crates.

Such a journey can take a toll on dogs, not just mentally but physically as well.

Murphy and David throw on some gloves and a parka to pick up the messy puppies one by one and bring them to the shelter van.

At the bottom center of the van, three dogs have been watching patiently and quietly for their turn. They are pomeranian huskies, or “pomskies” as they’re nicknamed.

Two of them are four-year-old females, potentially sisters, with fluffy brown and tan fur. One of them has honey brown eyes, the other has *one* of those same honey brown eyes, but her left eye is an icy blue.

Between them is a six-year-old female, with the classic black and white pattern of husky and bright blue eyes.

Murphy tells me that they were just a day away from euthanasia.

“I got a text just yesterday asking if I wanted to take them, so I added them on,” she said.

The last-minute pomskies haven't had time to be assigned a foster home or be given a spot at the shelter. So the Louie’s Legacy van is closed up, taking the barks and whines away with it to Cincinnati, and the pomsky girls stay with Murphy.

Along with the pomskies, a nervous, beige male mini poodle of an unknown age, which the breeder labeled as “at least four,” gets to stay with Murphy.

Through her garage, which is half filled with extra crates, her home has a room dedicated to foster dogs.

I pass Murphy’s three dogs of her own, a grey great dane, a boxer/bully mix and a little cavalier.

The little, long-haired cavalier- named Percy- was saved from a breeder in 2019, and plays a special role in Murphy’s house.

“Percy is like the therapy dog for the fosters,” Murphy says proudly.

It's true. Once we make it to the crate room and get each dog, carried one by one, settled in their space (the pomsies in a big crate all together and the mini poodle in his own), Percy comes in and calmly says hello.

Even that nervous mini poodle who had cowered from all the humans around ventures from the corner of his crate to sniff Percy's nose through the bars.

Murphy explains that sometimes the dogs who spent their lives being bred are not socialized with humans, but are comfortable with other dogs, even new ones like Percy.

"They share crates with other dogs, but they don't get much interaction with people other than being bred," said Murphy.

The pomsies seem happy to see Percy, too. All the dogs say hi with sniffs and a few barks.

Well, except one.

In a center crate with a blanket covering half of it, a scared bichon hides in the shadows.

"I've had her for nearly a month and we've made little to no progress," Murphy reflects.

The small, white bichon shakes as I crouch down to get a look at her. Her eyes are wide, and her tongue flicks out of her mouth with an underbite.

Murphy hopes that she realizes she is safe here soon and can find a happy home.

Now that every dog has been unloaded and put in their proper place, it is clean-up time.

Murphy and David agree that this is the longest part of the day.

Each crate is emptied of the newspaper at its bottom and tossed in a trash bag, then the crates are lugged out of the van to be scrubbed, rinsed and disinfected.

Once the crates are out, the giant blue tarp from the van's floor can be unhooked and taken out, taking all the remnants of the puppy litter's mess with it.

Every crate is scrubbed with basic cleaner and water, but Murphy goes in with a disinfectant sprayer to ensure the van and crates are clean and safe for future use.

“It’s impossible to be perfect, but we do the best we can,” she says.

Now the crates and van are left outside to dry. Luckily, the weather is nice, making it much easier than rainy or snowy days.

Murphy says she’ll likely spend the rest of the day trying to find a foster home for the pomsies. She knows they need space and attention for their husky energy to be let out.

The poodle and bichon will stay in her care, and hopefully get a little closer to realizing that people can be friends, too.

Next week, Murphy will do it all again, aiming to make Ohio a better place for the dogs and puppies that have and will keep on coming from breeders.