



## "FREE TO GOOD HOME?"

© 2000, Michelle E. Crean, Animal Aid of SW MI Volunteer/Webmaster



Animal Aid has frequently been criticized for charging an adoption fee. "If you're so anxious to find homes for these pets," we're told, "you should just give them away."

This attitude makes us shudder. In the first place, our small fees in no way begin to cover the cost incurred for medical treatment and upkeep of the pets we adopt out. Yes, we're anxious to find homes for our animals--GOOD homes. And some people who take free pets do provide wonderful homes. However, much too frequently, Animal Aid is called in to rescue former "free to good home" animals.

### Did you know:

**1) People value what they pay for. Pets obtained for free are less likely to be spayed or neutered by their new owners (why bother with vet bills?), and more likely to be abused and/or discarded, because "there are plenty more where that one came from!"** A recent study at one animal shelter yielded the startling statistic that 51% of all owner-surrendered dogs had been purchased for less than \$100; 41% of all owner-surrendered dogs had been obtained "Free to good home."

The handsome, well-fed-looking fellow above is Brutus, and he is an Animal Aid rescue. Brutus was the pampered friend of "Mark." Brutus and Mark played ball together and walked on the beach together, and, in general, enjoyed each other's companionship. Then, Mark's company transferred him to a different state. Mark didn't know how to take Brutus with him, or considered it unfair to submit his friend to the trauma of moving, or just plain didn't know that most states DO allow big, good-natured dogs to move in with their masters.

Whatever the reason, Mark placed an ad in his local newspaper: "Free to good home, friendly, lovable black lab." Someone saw the ad, called Mark, and said, "That's just the dog I've been looking for. Can I come over and see him?" The new person was very nice to Brutus, talked to him, rubbed his ears just the way Brutus liked to have his ears rubbed, and convinced Mark that he and Brutus were just made for each other.

**Brutus's new owner's idea of a good home--** a two-foot chain tied to a rope collar, in a garbage-filled backyard, no water dish or food bowl anywhere in sight. This sweet, loving dog was now 20 pounds underweight, suffering from dehydration, malnutrition, fleas, intestinal worms, mange, fly-chewed ears, heartworm, and, worst of all, neglect.

Luckily for him, neighbors called an Animal Aid volunteer, who arrived accompanied by a policeman. The new owner was arrested, charged, and convicted with cruelty to animals. He paid a fine which probably totaled less than Brutus's medical bills.

Brutus went to the vet for all kinds of medicine, then home with the volunteer for lunch. Several years later, he's still living with the volunteer, who eventually adopted him, and still eating! He's well and happy and a bit overweight; greets everyone with a tail wag and a wet kiss. But he still wants you to remember his story and this photo every time you see an ad that says, "Free to good home."



**2) So-called "Bunchers" gather free pets until they have enough for a trip to a Class B Dealer who is licensed by the USDA to sell to sell animals from "random sources" for research.** The Buncher may

only get \$25 a head for former pets, while a dealer can get \$100 or even more per pet. The Class B dealer probably already has a contract with certain facilities, and will transport them to other areas within a state, even out of state. While, unfortunately, there are legitimate medical reasons to use some animals in experimentation, the majority of reputable medical labs use animals bred for the specific purpose.

However, there are many, many different types of animal "research," and many types of facilities that use dogs. Almost every cosmetic, household, and chemical product is tested on animals, including former pets obtained from shelters and Class B Dealers. Veterinary schools and medical schools, and even some engineering schools use dogs and cats in classrooms and "research." Textile manufacturers who make products for medical use test and demonstrate on dogs, frequently retired racing greyhounds.

Research facilities that use live animals in testing are supposed to be registered with the USDA (though not all are); the USDA list of such facilities on their website cites 34 in the state of Michigan, mostly colleges and universities, as well as Borgess Medical Center, Dow Chemical, Dow Corning, Pharmacia & Upjohn, etc. (Please note that not all of these use dogs or cats.)

**3) Free animals are taken to "blood" pit-bulls--to train fighting dogs how to kill, and to enjoy it.** This can be dogs and cats, of any size--in fact, rescuers suspect that a recently rescued cat was used in this manner. Often, a larger dog's muzzle will be duct-taped shut so that he can't bite back, and the fighting dog will gain confidence in killing a dog larger than he is.

**4) One "adopter" in southwest Michigan took free kittens to his "good home"--as dinner for a pet snake.**

**5) Unspayed or unneutered pure-bred dogs may end up as "breeding stock" in a puppy mill.** One woman was certain that if she didn't give away her Dalmatians' AKC registration papers along with the dogs, she could keep them safe from millers. Wrong. Unscrupulous breeders, who use puppies as cash crops like other farmers raise cattle, pigs, or chickens, aren't above forging registration papers, or using those from deceased dogs. Rescuers have learned the hard way to make sure that all pets they place have been spayed or neutered before going to new homes.

**6) So-called "collectors" watch the newspapers for Free to Good Home animals. These collectors truly believe they are "rescuing" the animals.** Animal Aid had dealings with one such collector, right here in Southwestern Michigan. When the two Animal Aid volunteers and the policeman walked up the steps of an ordinary-looking house in Galien, MI, they had no idea they were walking into

a living hell.

**This space reserved  
for Phoenix and Zorro,  
Animal Aid's Galien rescue  
cats, who are presently still  
too shy to photograph.**

Neighbors had complained about foul smells coming from the house; the owner, they said, kept dozens of cats in there, but they hadn't seen her in a couple of weeks.

The place smelled, all right; a strong odor assaulted their noses the minute they got out of the car. Still, nothing in their experiences could have prepared them for what stunned their senses as they opened that front door: the unimaginable sights and silence and stomach-churning stench of mass death. Light was dim, and they saw trash all around--trash, and bodies. The owner of the house had simply locked the doors and windows and left dozens of cats behind with no food or water, to die. The only thing that kept the volunteers from collapsing in despair were faint rustles, scratches, mews, coming from just out of sight around the corner. There were still live cats in this house of horrors.

Estimates range from 40 - 60 as the number of cats this lady had abandoned; it was impossible to tell for sure. Over the next few days, volunteers from Animal Aid and the Humane Society of Southwest Michigan trapped and removed all of the live animals they could find. There were 18, in a wide range of ages, and of these, two later died.

All of them were starving, dehydrated, and totally unsociable. They had survived the only way they could, by preying on the small, the weak, the sick, and the dead. Rescued kittens lived in fear of adult cats; adult cats lived in fear of each other--and of human contact.

Phoenix and Zorro went to an Animal Aid volunteer for fostering; they have since been adopted. The other 14 went out to the Humane Society of SW MI, where all but three have also been adopted--most locally, but two are now thriving under the care of a lady in Kansas City, MO! Phoenix and Zorro still mistrust humans, and to quote one of the rescuers about the three who will probably live out their days at the Humane Society, "They need to go to a home that doesn't expect anything from them but just to live there."

Meanwhile, a warrant was issued for the arrest of the house's owner, and the entire area was outraged to learn that this was her THIRD offense! The THIRD time she had "collected" a house full of cats, and then abandoned them, the SECOND time in this very same house!

**How could this happen?** It's not as unusual as you might believe--or hope. Such people are called "collectors;" they take in orphaned dogs or cats, watch the "free to good home" ads, either don't believe in spaying and neutering or run out of funds for the vet bills. These collectors actually think they are "rescuing" the animals! More and more free pets come to them--they're very convincing; and they truly do love pets--and the ones they have keep reproducing, until the collectors are overwhelmed. In the best circumstances, animal rescue organizations are called. In the worst--the collector simply walks away.

This particular collector was located by police in a neighboring state, and brought back for trial. She will serve jail time, pay a fine, do community service, but there is no guarantee that when her sentence is served, she won't simply move to another house in another community in another state, and start answering "Free to good home" ads again.

As for the police, the neighbors, and especially the volunteers involved in the rescue of the Galien kitties--more than a year later, they're still having nightmares.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Some folks answering the "Free to Good Home" ads really are loving, responsible pet owners. Many--perhaps even most--are not. There are steps YOU can take to help end abuse:

- DON'T advertise Free pets; DO convince others not to. Some people even take the time to phone owners of pets advertising Free to Good Home and warn them of the dangers.
- DO spay/neuter to keep from creating possible Free to Good Home situations or condemning your pet to a short, miserable life in a puppy mill.
- DO write letters to the editors of your local newspapers warning of the dangers of Free to Good Home. (Sample letter attached.)
- DO contact breed rescue organizations (there is one for every breed of pure-bred dog!) or local animal welfare organizations for help in placing unwanted pets; if you bought the pet from a responsible breeder, he/she will help you rehome the pet.
- DO charge at least \$25 to discourage resale of pets to labs. (Some sources suggest charging no less than \$100 for pure-bred dogs.)
- DO take the time to interview every prospective owner. Ask for vet and personnel references, and check them, then visit the new home where your pet might be living!
- DO write a letter to your state and federal representatives in support of animal protection legislation, aimed at regulating puppy mills, cracking down on animal fighting, and doing away with Class B dealers, who sell animals obtained from "random sources" to research facilities. Random sources include strays, stolen pets, seized shelter animals, animals purchased at flea markets--and pets found through "Free to good home" ads. (See the Legislation and Laws section of [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org) or the Lobby section of [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org) for pending state and federal legislation.)
- DO report any incidence of suspected dog-fighting to police, Animal Control, and your local Humane Society. DON'T try to stop these people yourselves; there is a lot of money involved here, and you could be putting yourself and your pets at risk if you try to intervene alone.
- DO call police, animal welfare workers, even the health department, if someone in your area seems to be "collecting" cats or dogs.
- DO write to district attorneys, judges, and prosecutors if you hear of the arrest of any so-called collectors in your area, and urge them not only to prosecute to the full extent of the law, but also to mandate psychological counseling for these individuals in the hopes of avoiding repeat violations. (See "First Strike" information, [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org) for more on the connection between animal abuse and violence against other humans.)
- DO call police or animal welfare workers for any incidences of suspected abuse. Be willing to testify in court, if necessary. **Note:** what constitutes animal abuse is defined by state law. If your state has inadequate abuse laws, TRY TO CHANGE THEM!

Remember--the welfare of pets in this area is in **ALL** of our hands!

## SAMPLE NEWSPAPER LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

Editorial Page Editor  
Newspaper name  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip

Editor:

I was distressed at the number of "Free Pets to Good Homes" ads in the newspaper tonight, and just had to write to let people know what happens to many of the pets obtained through such ads. Much too frequently, the Humane Societies and other animal rescue organizations are called in to rescue former "free to good home" pets--if the pets are lucky.

There are very good reasons that Animal Rescue, the Humane Society, and Animal Control all charge an adoption fee for their animals. These small fees in no way begin to cover the cost incurred for medical treatment and upkeep of the pets they adopt out. **Did you know:**

- People value what they pay for. Pets obtained for free are more likely to be abused and/or discarded, because "there are plenty more where that came from!"
- So-called "Bunchers" gather free pets until they have enough to make a trip to a lab worthwhile, then sell them for \$25 a head for "research," household product and cosmetic testing, and vivisection!
- Free animals are taken to "blood" pit-bulls--to train fighting dogs how to kill, and to enjoy it!
- According to one Humane Society, free kittens are being taken to new "good homes" in some areas--as dinner for a pet snake!
- Puppy millers take free unspayed/unneutered pure-bred dogs for breeding stock.
- So-called "collectors," like the woman in Michigan who recently left dozens of cats to die in her locked house, watch the newspapers for Free to Good Home animals. These collectors truly believe they are "rescuing" the animals!

Some people answering the "Free to Good Homes" ads really are loving, responsible pet owners. Many--perhaps even most--are not. Please DON'T advertise Free pets; charge at least \$25 to discourage sale to research labs. Please DO take the time to interview each and every prospective owner; the Humane Society or any rescue organization can help you with what types of questions to ask. And please have Mama spayed as soon as the kittens or puppies are weaned!

Sincerely,

(your signature)

Your Name  
Your Address  
Your Telephone Number