

Do's and Don'ts of Effective Pound Seizure Advocacy

By Allie Phillips

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtfully committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

It was June 10, 2001 and I was volunteering at an animal shelter where I cared for the cats. Lilac was a dilute tortoiseshell cat with big, green eyes. I was cradling her in my arms, reassuring her that I would have her and her son, Linus, safely out of the shelter by that weekend when a man entered the cat room and took her out of my arms. At first I thought he was an adopter. But he had a cold and uncaring look in his eyes, and did not handle her with the love and care of an adopter. When I asked if he was adopting Lilac, he said that she was being taken away to “save human lives.” I immediately realized he was a random source Class B dealer. I never saw Lilac again, despite my plea to the shelter director to rescue her.

That day changed my life and launched me into the world of animal advocacy, particularly to end pound seizure. At the time, I was a well-respected and successful assistant prosecuting attorney in Michigan. My legal training and public speaking skills were assets as I worked with other volunteers to launch a public campaign to end pound seizure at our county's animal control shelter—a campaign that turned vicious against the advocates and shelter pets, and resulted in the sacrifice of my career in order to expose the dirty little secret at the shelter.

Along the way, I learned what worked and what did not. In the end, we were successful and banned pound seizure from our shelter, which started a domino effect with other Michigan shelters. It is ironic that the hearing, the final battle to end pound seizure in that shelter, occurred on June 10, 2003, exactly three years to the day that Lilac disappeared to an unknown fate and changed my world forever.

After that success, I volunteered my legal guidance to advocates in five other successful pound seizure campaigns in Michigan counties. To this day, through co-founding Michiganders for Shelter Pets and authoring the only book on pound seizure, I still work to end the outdated and barbaric practice in Michigan and in other states. I have dedicated more than a decade to advocating for shelter pets against those who do not work in their best interest: random source Class B dealers, the research and university training industry, as well as shelter directors and local leaders who cling to pound seizure.

Advocates in each state, county, and animal shelter will encounter different dynamics in ending pound seizure. These are a few recommendations.

STICK TO THE FACTS

The most important rule in pound seizure advocacy is to always, without fail, speak only from facts. Do not fabricate stories, speculate, or publicly discuss or share rumors regarding any of the players in pound seizure. Whether you are giving a public speech, sending an e-mail, posting information on a website or social media page, blogging, giving an interview, or even sharing another organization's documentation about pound seizure, you must ensure that what you publish is accurate and supported by documented evidence. If you publish (vocally or in writing) or re-publish anything that is not supported by documented evidence, you may be sued for defamation, libel, and/or slander. I have known dealers and researchers who have worked with law firms to send threatening letters to individuals, county governments, and shelters that attempt to curtail their business practices. So be factual so that you can be credible.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Learn about pound seizure, its players, and the pros and cons before undertaking a pound seizure advocacy campaign. You need to anticipate the arguments of the opposition and have articulated and researched arguments to refute their claims. For example, some dealers claim that random-source shelter dogs and cats are curing various diseases. To

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counter that position, ask those making the claims to provide a peer-reviewed research study that shows the participation of shelter dogs and cats (not purpose-bred animals) curing a debilitating disease. To date, I have not seen any such studies.

BE CREDIBLE

When influencing decision-makers for change, credibility is critical. Base your advocacy primarily on facts, research, and statistics intermingled with a little



numbers, will help add reality to a campaign.

START THE DISCUSSION

Begin your campaign by first speaking with the shelter director in hopes of obtaining an agreement to end the practice. If the shelter is receiving a financial incentive for engaging in pound seizure, work with the facility to offset that financial incentive. If the shelter is unwilling or unable to change the policy, then go to whomever has the power to make that change (county government, state government). Speak to those officials, provide all of the documentation you have gathered, and demonstrate how the shelter will draw in more adopters, volunteers, and donors if pound seizure is eliminated. If an agreement is not

reached, then one of the final methods is to notify your community of the practice through the media, public speaking events, newspaper advertisements, and social media sites. When the public learns of pound seizure, they will be outraged. Those outraged citizens are voters, and can pressure their elected officials to end the practice.

SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

As your campaign goes public, share information on how people can help protect their pets from being victims of pound seizure. Good messages include having pets microchipped, keeping cats safely indoors, and always supervising dogs outside. Educating the community about the impact of pound seizure and the potential for family pets to be in shelters will awaken citizens to support you.

STAY LEVEL-HEADED

Do not let your emotions override common sense. If your advocacy also has you working directly with animals who may become victims of pound seizure, do not make rash decisions. Rely on the support of your group to help each other through difficult times.

emotion. Since pound seizure is mostly allowed through state law or county policy, advocating to these decision-makers based solely on emotion will not be as successful as backing your arguments with facts and research.

COLLABORATE

Band together with other concerned citizens. Pound seizure campaigns can take years before you achieve success. To avoid burnout, it is important to have a reliable team. Consider forming a nonprofit 501(c3) organization to support your efforts, which will allow you to fundraise and provide protection from personal liability. Additionally, when working with others, it is important for everyone to agree on tactics. Consider having each person sign a volunteer agreement that outlines expectations that can help to reign in rogue volunteers from harming a campaign.

FIND INFORMATION

Request annual shelter reports to determine how many animals have been victims of pound seizure. And if you have photos of cats and dogs victimized by pound seizure, they, along with annual

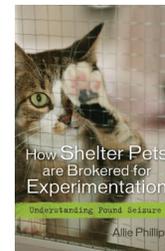
KEEP IT LEGAL

This should go without saying, but do not engage in illegal conduct. Using illegal tactics to drive home the point that animals should not be used in research can only harm the animals further. There are reports of advocates who have threatened researchers and have been charged with crimes for their conduct. Those actions only undercut the effective, credible, and legal advocacy of those of us trying to end this practice.

DON'T GIVE UP!

Even in the face of adversity and exhaustion, do not give up. I have been in the trenches of pound seizure campaigns and have seen the toll it can take on people. Infighting begins, you watch the shelter pets going out the door to a dealer or research facility, and you begin to lose faith. Just remember that if you and everyone else in the community turned a blind eye to pound seizure, those shelter pets would have no hope. Focus on the positive each day, celebrate the small victories and each pet that is adopted from the shelter, and take care of yourself. I still have an album filled with hundreds of photos of cats whom I helped save from pound seizure. Those photos kept me going on dark days.

You can find a detailed list of these do's and don'ts, as well as other important information, in *How Shelter Pets are Brokered for Experimentation: Understanding Pound Seizure*. With safe and effective advocacy, and working together, we can make pound seizure a barbaric practice of the past. **AV**



Allie Phillips, Esq., is an author, attorney, and advocate for animals and other vulnerable victims. She is the author of How Shelter Pets are Brokered for Experimentation: Understanding Pound Seizure (2010) and Defending the Defenseless: A Guide to Protecting and Advocating for Pets (2011). Learn more about her work and books at www.alliephillips.com.