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November 9, 2020

Re: Fraudulent Posts — Request for New Policy

Dear Mr. Buckmaster,

The Animal Legal Defense Fund applauds Craigslist for its intent to ban companion-animal sales on the platform.

Unfortunately, despite the existing ban, companion-animal sales continue largely unabated on Craigslist, often under the guise of “re-homing.” All too often, these animals have been irresponsibly bred and cared for, leaving them with health problems that saddle unsuspecting Craigslist users with heartache and significant veterinary bills.

Two such Craigslist users are Brittany and Brandon Swigart, Southern California residents who purchased a puppy advertised as an 8-week-old “mini Labradoodle” through a Craigslist post. The Swigarts paid \$1,200 for the puppy, whom they were assured had received all necessary vaccinations. But they soon discovered that the puppy they had named Winnie was desperately ill. The Swigarts took Winnie to a veterinary hospital, where she stayed for three weeks before eventually having to be humanely euthanized. She had been diagnosed with distemper, a highly contagious viral disease that a more responsible breeder would have vaccinated her against — and a veterinarian estimated her age at only four weeks, not eight, much too young to have been taken from her mother and sold. (The sellers had also lied about Winnie’s breed and color — she had been dyed to resemble a reddish-brown Labradoodle.)

Beyond the anguish they experienced, the Swigarts were also left with approximately \$9,000 in veterinary bills incurred during their ultimately unsuccessful effort to save Winnie. **They are currently among a group of nine puppy-buyer plaintiffs — represented by the Animal Legal Defense Fund — suing the sellers, the Kenney family, for using deceptive marketing to sell ailing, parasite-ridden puppies online.** Puppies purchased by the plaintiffs were diagnosed with distemper, parvovirus (another highly contagious viral disease), giardia (a parasitic infection typically spread through fecal contamination), and worms. Several of the puppies died.

Sadly, the experiences of these buyers are not uncommon. And while it is clearly not the intention of Craigslist to support or endorse the actions of unethical sellers like those in this case, it is an unfortunate fact that such sellers have found a profitable platform in Craigslist.

Meanwhile, online animal-sale scams — in which would-be buyers are duped into paying for animals that are never delivered and may or may not actually exist — are a growing problem. According to the Better Business Bureau, tens of thousands of reports of fraudulent online companion-animal sales have been filed in the U.S. alone in recent years — and these reports have increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, now totaling nearly a quarter of all online-sales scams reported to the bureau.

Craigslist’s platform is also currently being exploited by animal “flippers,” who may steal animals or find lost ones (often dogs of sought-after breeds) before selling them to unsuspecting buyers. Craigslist’s current policy not only leaves users at risk of purchasing unhealthy, nonexistent, or stolen companion animals — but it leaves countless other animals in danger as well.

The most practical, consistent, and ethical solution is for Craigslist is to simply ban all types of animal transfer posts — including sales or “re-homing” at any price, as well as “free-to-good-home” listings — for every animal species across the board. This would be an eminently reasonable and enforceable place for Craigslist to draw the line — permitting the sale of inanimate objects within certain categories (i.e., vehicles or furniture), while banning the sale of living beings. Such a policy would protect consumers and animals while removing a profitable outlet for unethical breeders and sellers.

While Craigslist may, at times, have been used to legitimately “re-home” animals (as opposed to selling them for profit), it is not the appropriate platform for this service, and in recent years several other websites have emerged to provide a specialized resource for re-homing. Meanwhile, reputable rescue groups typically avoid using Craigslist to spread the word about animals for adoption, in large part because they are aware that people with ill intent may use the platform to obtain animals. And “free-to-good-home” listings put animals at risk of being exploited for illegal or otherwise harmful activities, such as dogfighting or animal experimentation.

At least one Craigslist competitor, Facebook Marketplace, has already banned all posts about animal sales, “[including] posting about animals for adoption.” The Animal Legal Defense Fund encourages Craigslist to follow suit.

Please respond to this letter by November 13, 2020 to advise the Animal Legal Defense Fund of Craigslist’s plans for banning all forms of animal transfer across the platform. The Animal Legal Defense Fund stands ready and willing to provide any assistance Craigslist may need in facilitating this urgently needed change.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter of animal and consumer protection.



Elizabeth Putsche

Communications Director
Animal Legal Defense Fund