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Local group rescues roughly 1,600 dogs from high-kill Southern shelters

By: Ashley Winchester , Reporter

Killingworth - In a small commuter park-and-ride in Wallingford, one early December morning, 26 Connecticut families stand at bus stop, waiting like anxious mothers, for the delivery of the newest addition to their homes. Excitement grows as a large horse trailer with Tennessee plates pulls into the lot, and the crowd collects around the truck.

A din of excited barks soon replaces the quiet chatter of the group as the driver opens a door to reveal a ceiling-high stack of animal carriers, each occupied by a dog awaiting a new home. After ownership contracts are signed and papers are distributed, families line up along the side of the trailer and wait as the driver begins to sort through the truck's content.

These dogs, once bound for certain death in rural Southern animal shelters, have traveled hundreds of miles in the past 18 hours to find permanent homes in Connecticut. This rescue service is a coordination effort of dedicated volunteers from Labs4Rescue, a Killingworth-based nonprofit organization, which removes Labrador retrievers and Lab mixes from high-kill shelters in the rural South and Midwest.

Labs4Rescue is the brainchild of Killingworth resident Cathy Mahle, a full-time pharmaceutical scientist with a soft spot for animals in need. When Mahle adopted her first dog from a Missouri shelter three years ago, "I was shocked that there was a purebred dog in a shelter. I thought 'if I took this one dog, there would be no more purebreds in the shelters,'" she said.

However, she soon found this was hardly the case. After some research, Mahle was amazed-and horrified-to learn that some shelters in the rural South put down up to 60 purebred Labs and Lab mixes each week. Animals in these shelters are given five working days to be adopted, and nine out of 10 dogs surrendered are killed, often en-masse, in gas chambers under inhumane conditions.

"Things like being given only a day or two to be adopted just don't happen here in New England. Most people don't realize that purebred Labs are killed every day in shelters [down South]," she said.

Mahle knew something had to be done, and in July of 2002, Labs4Rescue was organized with a collaborated transport of two Lab puppies from Memphis, Tenn. to Maine. A small network of volunteers brought the puppies North by driving in teams, passing the dogs off to another driver every 100 miles. For the next year, by utilizing this tag-team approach to transport the animals, Mahle was able to save roughly three dogs each month. Since then, the organization has grown to employ a full-time professional transporter who delivers an average of 30 Labs a week to homes in the Northeast. To date, Labs4Rescue has saved approximately 1,600 Labs from high-kill shelters in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

According to Liz Morrison, a Labs4Rescue contact in Lake Charles, La., Labs and Lab mixes are the most predominant breed in shelters in the South, The breed is one of the most popular in the United States, and many backyard breeders in the South try to cash in on popularity by creating small-scale puppy mills. Spay and neuter laws are not strictly enforced, and Labrador females often give birth to large litters, adding to the problem. Many hunters abandon or shoot their less successful water dogs at the end of the season, and only the luckiest animals arrive in shelters.

"Of the 10,000 dogs gassed last year, at least 7,000 of [the dogs] were purebred Labs and Lab mixes," Morrison said. "We are frantic to save these Labs before their certain fate, but it is always too late for the vast majority of them. The ones we have saved and sent to wonderful homes up North are the very lucky few."

Lisa Pierce of Knoxville, Tenn. said the Lab overpopulation is just as rampant in her state as well. She has worked with Labs4Rescue during the past two years to help save dogs from high-kill shelters in her area.

"Without Labs4Rescue, I personally would have had over 300 Labs die in my shelters," said Pierce. "Our shelters are full of beautiful Labs and Lab mixes and our kill rates are [more than] 80 percent due to overcrowding. Spring is the worst, we have Christmas-puppy

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returns-got as a gift, and guess what, [the puppy] grew up and wasn't so cute anymore-as well as all the new litters that we get from the unaltered dogs... Changing attitudes in the rural South is a slow process, and in the meantime, finding homes for these Labs is a godsend," Pierce said.

While Mahle has met with criticism over importing shelter dogs when there are many local dogs in need of rescue, there is a demand in the Northeast for Labs, which can be filled by rescued dogs from the South, she said. Most Connecticut shelters are populated by breeds that are not so "family friendly", and rarely do Connecticut shelters contain purebred animals, she said. However, Labs4Rescue does occasionally pull Labs from local shelters as well, said Mahle.

Deb Cook, also of Killingworth, organizes the transports of the dogs. Every weekend she coordinates the arrival of between 20 and 70 Southern Labs. Cook began her work at Labs4Rescue as a volunteer foster home, and has since adopted five Labs, all previous fosters.

"I'm not allowed to foster any more because I end up falling in love and keeping them," she said.

Rescued dogs are either adopted by families right away or put into foster care with families until they are adopted permanently. Labs4Rescue utilizes a network of foster families in Tennessee and is working to build the foster program in New England.

Killingworth resident Peg Cornell has fostered eight Labs in the past year, and adopted two.

"As far as I'm concerned, I could have an entire house full of dogs," Cornell said. "The only problem is there's not enough couch space for all of them. The thing that amazes me is [the dogs] come from such circumstances where they've been in shelters, and yet they come here so loving and trusting," she said.

Cornell waits with the other families as the transport driver sorts through the crates and paperwork. The first few dogs to come out of the trailer are a litter of sleepy, fuzzy nine week-old Border Collie Lab mixes. Finally, Cornell's latest foster, a three year-old purebred Yellow Lab named Willow, climbs out. With exuberant Lab energy, even after the long journey, Willow wags her tail and affectionately greets her temporary mother. Cornell will spend between two days and two weeks getting to know Willow's personality and behavior before matching her with a new owner.

"The best experience is when a family comes to pick up their new dog and they're so happy and excited," Cornell said. "Even though you're sad to see [the animal] go, you know that everyone worked together to give this dog a new home, and if we all hadn't intervened, [the animal] would have been euthanized. This is the most committed group of volunteers I have ever experienced in my life," said Cornell.

Residents interested in fostering or adopting a Lab can visit www.Labs4rescue.com and fill out an application, or e-mail Cathy Mahle at cathy@Labs4rescue.com for more information. A \$300 adoption fee includes transport costs, up-to-date vaccinations and spaying or neutering of all dogs. To learn more about the foster process firsthand, readers may call Deb Cornell at 663-1869.



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