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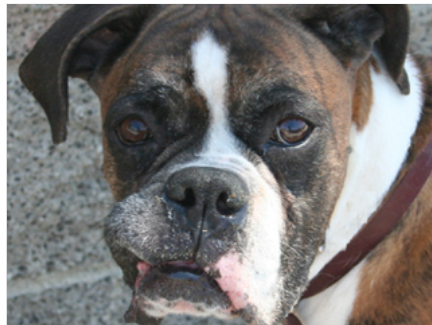
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California Healthy Pet Act: Mandatory Fix Has Fur Flying With Opponents

By **Nora Zimmet**
FOX FAN

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Los Angeles Boxer Rescue in Sun Valley, California
 Dogs like Harley were the inspiration for AB 1634, a bill currently making its way through the California state legislature



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Editor's Note: On Wednesday, April 16, 2007, Assembly Bill 1634 — The California Healthy Pets Act — continued on its path to the Governor's desk when it was passed by the Assembly Appropriations Committee on a B roll call vote. • [Read the Press Release](#)

SUN VALLEY, Calif. — The first thing you notice about Harley is his characteristic Boxer muzzle, which looks like it belongs on a toothless old man, gumming a cigar.

My cameraman Chuck and I were at the Los Angeles Boxer Rescue shooting interviews and b-roll for a story we were working on. As Chuck was walking around the kennel, shooting some of the 150 dogs that the group had rescued from shelters

all over California, I was getting a tour of the facility by two volunteers, Joni and Haze.

(Story continues below)

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"Who's this guy?" I asked when I saw Harley's cage.

"That's Harley. What a sad story. See this cage?" Haze gestured to the 2' by 3' puppy prison that held the dog. "His owner, who turned him into us, kept him in a cage like this for five years. Straight. And can you believe? He admitted this to us."

"How old is he?"

"Five."

I don't understand some people ... how pets to them are like shoes or belts or treadmills — to be purchased with gusto, used with enthusiasm, and then thrown in the closet when the inspiration has passed. I can't imagine a whole life spent behind bars; even prisoners serving life sentences at least start their lives in freedom.

But if Harley — nearly toothless from a life of chewing on his cage, his paws red with infection from standing in urine — was scared by or angry about a lost puppyhood, he didn't show it. While the rest of his kennel mates jumped, barked and lunged at the camera, Harley sat patiently, waiting for a pet, wagging his stub of a tail when he got one. His eyes looked hopeful and seemed to say, "Hey, I've waited this long. I didn't get my forever home today. But maybe tomorrow."

Dogs like Harley were the inspiration for AB 1634, a bill currently making its way through the California state legislature. Introduced by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine (D-40th District), the bill (also called The California Healthy Pets Act) would make the spaying and neutering of all cats and dogs in California mandatory. If a puppy or kitten is not fixed once it turns four-months-old, the owner

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would be liable to pay \$500 in fines.

Supporters of the bill — such as L.A. Animal Services, the California Veterinary Medical Association and dozens of others — say if the bill is passed, the effect would be two-fold. The first is humanitarian. In California, over 800,000 lost and homeless dogs and cats are being rescued by Animal Services every year, and of those, over 50 percent are being euthanized. Groups like Boxer Rescue — no-kill sanctuaries that take a specific breed from local shelters and keep them as long as it takes to adopt them out — do their best to rescue these animals, but there isn't enough room or money to save them all.

If you think the dogs and cats that end up in these places are "bad" or "unadoptable" — well, I thought so too — it's simply not true. It was proven when I went to a shelter in Downey, Calif. almost two years ago — strolling the aisles, I found rows and rows of beautiful, healthy dogs, of all ages, sizes, and breeds. I found one puppy who had been in and out of that shelter twice — and she was only six months old. She had messed the cot in her kennel and was lying on the cold concrete, her coat dull and ribs visible. A volunteer explained that the average "stay" for a dog in Downey was five days before it was euthanized. This puppy was on day 10. I named her Lila. As I write this, she is sleeping next to me.

The second effect would be a financial one. According to Assemblyman Levine, California taxpayers spend \$250 million a year to house, care for and ultimately euthanize unwanted animals. That does not include the millions more to build new shelters to try to keep up with the ever-growing number of homeless dogs and cats. Advocates for the California Healthy Pets Act figure that for every dollar spent on spaying and neutering, taxpayers save over \$18 on housing unwanted animals. Ed Boks, general manager of L.A. Animal Services, calls it "turning the faucet off" — staving off over-population at the root of the problem, as opposed to playing catch-up once the damage has been done.

But there are opponents to AB 1634.

Many breeders and Service Animal groups say that the legislation is designed to make puppies and kittens extinct, and make it much more expensive for them to do business. Under the proposed bill, breeders and service animals would be exempt from mandatory spay and neuter, but they would have to pay higher permit fees to keep their animals intact. They say these higher fees would, in turn, drive their businesses underground, and they would be forced to avoid licensing altogether.

Other detractors call the bill an intrusion of privacy.

Wayne Sheldon, president of the Sacramento Council of Dogs Club, says his pets are not the government's business, claiming that "when you make the decision on what I can do with my pet, you are taking my right of pet ownership with my pet away." Many groups against the bill maintain that educating the public about responsible ownership is the only answer to the pet population problem.

• **SPEAK OUT!** Do you think the bill impinges on the property rights of owning a pet?

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Throughout my research of this story and my talks with people for and against AB 1634, one opinion has been consistent; no one is "pro-euthanasia." I believe everyone can agree that killing animals to control population is not the solution in California. If you disagree with me, I urge you to please go to your local shelter and ask to see what I have seen — puppy and kitten carcasses piled on top of each other in garbage cans. Industrial-sized garbage cans.

About a half an hour before our **FOX Report hit**, I got a call from Boxer Rescue. It was Haze.

"I have great news!" she said. "Harley's been adopted!" A single woman had come by the day before and selected Harley to be her new pet. He would be the only dog. The prince of the household. A forever home.

I was excited for Harley. Truth be told, I had wanted to take him myself, but current household circumstances (and two territorial German Shepherds) would not allow it.

My excitement soon dissipated as soon as it had materialized — there are so many more Harleys lined up to take his cage. And most of them won't have his happy ending.

But maybe there's hope.

• **E-mail Nora**

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Related Links:

• **How Can You Help? California Healthy Pets Act**

• **Blog: Read more about the California's Healthy Pets Act**

• **Opposition to the CA Healthy Pet Act, AB 1634: Mandatory Spay and Neuter for Dogs and Cats**

• **Press Release: Assembly Appropriations Committee hears California Healthy Pets Act**

Here's what some FOX Fans are saying:

"Thanks for your great coverage of this issue. I am collecting signatures and showing up for rallies in favor of this bill and so hoping it will pass. I am heartbroken for the animals who are dumped in shelters and killed." — *Meredith (San Diego, CA)*

"This should be mandatory in every state, anyone that opposes this has probably never seen the suffering that happens with pet overpopulation. Great article." — *Indera (Charlotte, NC)*

"I agree with mandatory neutering. I have Lucy who was rescued from a puppy farm. She lost an eye there from the awful conditions. She is happy now and had all the puppies she ever will. If people refuse to take good care of their animals, they should not have them. Some one has to speak up for them, even if the government has to be the one to mandate it." — *Judy*

"Nora, I understand the situation but when are people going to understand you can't legislate everything. We breed animals. They are not my prime source of income by any means, but we love them. I will not neuter them. They are under my control and have fenced yard within the confines of my property. We selectively have a litter maybe once a year. But it is our choice and the people

who buy our pups are carefully scrutinized. California very well may have a problem and it is called irresponsibility. This seems to be a constant theme in their major cities, like L.A. and San Francisco, where the left allow any and everything and ask responsibility of no one. The government will cover the bill. What's next control people the same way because there are too many unwanted?" — *Mike*

"Nora, I wanted to thank you for an excellent article in support of AB1634. Well written and heartfelt. Good job!" — *Barbara (Sacramento County Animal Shelter Volunteer, LAPCATS Rescue Coordinator)*

"Thanks, Nora, for the fabulous article about Harley and the other dogs and cats. Articles like this are critical in opening people's eyes to what really goes on to these animals. I don't live in California, but I have done rescue for many years and have seen plenty of horror. One of my dogs was rescued at three months of age, a few days from starving to death. She had no fur at all, her body was covered with scabs, and her eyes were stuck shut with scabs. I have the photos. The people in the neighborhood refused to give her water, they said they just wait for the strays to die so they can throw them in the dumpster." — *Rosemary (Keaau, HI)*

"Hi Nora, If this is put into law, what's next? If abused children (rather than abused pets) were the subject, would their solution be sterilizing all teenagers? I understand their intent, but as we saw in Hurricane Katrina an entire city can be wiped out by disaster. Nature is a big factor in deciding this issue. We simply do not know the future. If a disease spreads through the animal population and animals are virtually extinct then what do these people say for themselves? It will be too late then. In China they thought by eliminating girls they could solve the over-population problem with humans. Well, that didn't work either. Whenever we interfere with nature God shows us why we shouldn't. I understand their intent, but liberals are short-term thinkers and therefore have not looked at why the ends do not justify the means to date." — *Laurie*

"Thank you so much for your piece on spay/neuter. If only everyone could see the piles of carcasses that you saw maybe they would think twice about breeding. I have had parents tell me that they want their animal to have a litter so that their child can see the miracle of birth. Well how about going to a shelter and watching a puppy or kitten be killed all because there are not enough homes. People need to realize the brutal reality and we need to make a change to this horrible situation. Thank you for your part in telling the animals' story." — *Faye*

"Thank you, Nora, for your great story on AB 1634. This is a much-needed, long overdue bill. It will really make a difference for animals throughout the state!" — *Anna*

"Good article, but the fact is that shelter intake and euthanasia numbers have dropped dramatically in CA since the mid-1980s, mainly due to increased owner-education programs and low-cost spay/neuter programs. Shelter numbers are NOT 'ever-increasing' as you stated. AB 1634 isn't the answer; education and affordable sterilization will accomplish the stated goals of this bill better than punitive action." — *Karen*

"If the Harley adoption does not work out, I want him!" — *Diane (Texas)*

"Thank you for your representation of the issues of AB1634. I have been a volunteer of Boxer Rescue LA for years and have often seen the heart wrenching views that you experienced during your visit. I am also the proud mom of four boxers that were deemed 'unworthy' by backyard breeders and thrown to the street, some as puppies, all with health issues. My hope is that this bill will weed out these un-reputable breeders. And force those in the breeding business to be treated as just that, a business, and held to the same standards as any other real business." — *Lori (BRLA Volunteer)*

"Nora, Thanks for a poignant and informative story. I am sure that it will help many of us think more compassionately about the many other Harley's of the world." — *Joan*

"Nora, I have tears in my eyes after reading your article. Thank you so much for the article. I do canine rescue and kitties too. It is a very sad situation as you have found. Please keep reminding everyone to be responsible and to think 'rescue.'" — *Karen (King of Prussia, PA)*

"Dear Nora, Here in Central Utah, no one is ever prosecuted for animal cruelty. Yet I see it everyday; it breaks my heart! Rescues are awesome, like Mooneys Boxer Rescue in Richfield, Utah. We rescued Boomer, a five-year-old standard Boxer two years ago, and love him. Had I been there that day Harley would have had a home too! Boomer and Harley could be litter mates. Great story! I'll keep following it." — *Milt*

"Great article. This is a great topic that needs to be explored by more journalists such as yourself. Thanks for writing this." — *Randy*

"What a great story to report about these animals — and Harley. Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I am contacting [California Assemblyman Bill] Emmerson as well as the Assembly Appropriations committee. We just got our dog from a shelter and he is being neutered today, he also has a history of neglect." — *Caroline*

"Hi Nora, What a beautifully written story on the spay/neuter bill. Thank you for your thoughtful coverage on such an important issue. I hope very much that this bill will pass." — *Best wishes, Kristen*

"Nora, as a dog owner, breeder and trainer, I am appalled at California's 'feel good' legislation put on the table by people who are professional politicians and have no idea about the topic they are trying to address. My wife and I raise Newfoundland dogs. All of our dogs are obedience trained, water rescue trained, competition carting and all are registered therapy dogs. Additionally, we show some of our dogs and have two national champions. For anyone to show a dog, the dog must be intact. It cannot be neutered or spayed. California sees hundreds of thousands of dollars spent there and collects taxes on the building use for dog shows throughout the State. One reason for not mandating: for our breed and many other large breeds, full skeletal growth does not occur until 14-22 months old. To neuter or spay a younger dog can severely impact the health of the dog by altering the hormone levels and can potentially cause huge orthopedic problems for the dogs in the future. Imagine what a human male or female would look like if they had forced castration or hysterectomy at age 12! The key to solving the problem is enforcing laws already on the books. Every state in the U.S. has laws against animal abuse. A few thousand dollars spent on enforcement, and, the publication of the punishments of the offenders would make people think twice before mistreating an animal. Thanks for your story. I look forward to a follow up." — *Bruce*

"I really loved your article about the shelters; I can't agree with you more. Although I breed and show Bernese Mountain dogs, I also have three rescues (total three dogs and two cats) and am very active in a three statewide network of animal rescues. I would be more than happy to pay more to keep my dogs intact, and am just as anxious to ensure no unplanned litters take place, even to the point of double-fencing our yard. I also take back any of my puppies that don't work out, no questions asked. Perhaps more strict regulation would weed out breeders that should be weeded out. Also, I am so glad you let your readers know that Harley's OK. I was about to post him to my rescuers!" — *Cindy*

Nora Zimmert is a general assignment producer based in Los Angeles. She started at FOX in 2003 as an associate producer. She has covered Colombia's Civil War, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and, most recently, the latest Ballistic Missile test aboard the USS Lake Erie.



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