



Opinion: 4,000 beagles just got a gift from the Justice Department

Opinion by Melanie D.G. Kaplan

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4,000 beagles will be rescued from a Virginia animal testing facility

Editor’s Note: [Melanie D.G. Kaplan](#) is an independent journalist and 2021-22 MIT Knight Science Journalism Project Fellow. She is working on a book about her former lab beagle and animals used for science. The opinions expressed in this commentary are her own. Read [more opinion](#) at CNN.

(CNN) — Some nights, when I struggle to fall asleep, I count beagles. As a real, live beagle slumbers peacefully in the crook of my arm – free at last from the nightmares that once made him whimper and growl in his sleep – I watch little tricolored hounds jumping over a fence in my mind. But recently, when sleep has eluded me, my thoughts have wandered to the 4,000 beagles making [headlines](#) across the nation.

Over the past year, the US Department of Agriculture, which regulates breeders that sell animals for research and testing, reported [dozens of violations](#) of the Animal Welfare Act at a beagle breeding facility run by [Envigo RMS in Cumberland, Virginia](#).



Melanie Kaplan

[A seven-month undercover investigation](#) by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) last year found that the dogs had been “[warehoused](#)” in “[prison-like](#)” conditions. [USDA inspectors](#) found numerous violations including “live insects, worms, maggots, beetles, flies, ants, mold, and feces,” in the dogs’ food and said that 300 puppies had died in the space of seven months of “unknown causes.”

In May, the Department of Justice stepped in and [filed a lawsuit against Envigo](#) for “failing to meet the minimum requirements for handling, housing, feeding, sanitation, and adequate veterinary care,” for the animals. [Envigo responded](#) by denying the complaint and saying it would “[vigorously defend](#) against the lawsuit.” But its parent company [Inotiv announced last week](#) that it had reached an agreement with federal officials to close the Cumberland facility without paying fines or admitting wrongdoing.

[The industry](#) says, of course, that research dogs generally are [well cared for](#). And Envigo [says on its site](#) that “(w)ithout animal research, we would not be able to produce the life-changing medicines that enhance and save lives across the world.”

The Humane Society of the United States [has begun removing the dogs](#) and is working with several groups to provide them with medical care and place them in homes, a process that [may take around 60 days](#).

I’ve been following this story closely because that beagle in the crook of my arm was born at the Cumberland facility nearly 13 years ago. His name is Hammy.

The facility where Hammy was born, 50 miles west of Virginia’s capital city Richmond, was run at the time by a different company that also bred beagles on an industrial scale to sell for experiments.



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I don’t know for sure what conditions were like when Hammy was there. But I know that being bred and raised for experimentation in an industrial facility is a terrible way for any dog to start his life.

Even at breeding facilities that are in compliance with federal animal welfare laws, puppies and dogs are [stripped of many freedoms](#) and denied the ability to exhibit instinctual behaviors. They live in crowded kennels and fight over food.

They don't sleep soundly or get to explore new terrain. They can't choose where to sniff or sleep or snuggle, as they would in a home where they were cared for by a nurturing individual or a loving human family.

If you've ever experienced the joy of watching a dog get the "zoomies" – impulsively and gleefully zipping around to burn off excess energy – you must understand that zoomies aren't possible for a dog confined to a kennel or housed in a laboratory.

When I recently interviewed bioethicist and author Jessica Pierce for a book I'm working on, she told me about studies that examine the psychological trauma experienced by prisoners of war and people who have been in solitary confinement, even for a short time. "It has measurable effects that never go away," she said.

"You're never the same person as before. I think the same is probably true for dogs. It damages the psyche in a way that is irreparable."

Dogs, who share more than 350 diseases with humans, have been used in research for centuries, including for the first known successful blood transfusion, Pavlov's classical conditioning studies and test runs in outer space. Today, dogs are purchased for research, drug and chemical testing and advanced medical or veterinary training by universities, pharmaceutical and chemical companies, hospitals, pet food companies and veterinary schools.

According to the USDA, in 2019 – the most recent year for which reports are available – close to 60,000 dogs were used in research facilities in almost every state and the District of Columbia. Beagles are the dog breed used most often for research because of their small size and docile temperament, but other breeds are used as well.

Much of the research gets federal funding. At the Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, dogs have been used for spinal cord injury and heart disease studies because parts of the canine anatomy and physiology are similar to ours.

In recent years, multiple states have put laws into place requiring research facilities to try to offer their dogs for adoption if they are no longer being used for research.



Melanie Kaplan and beagle Alexander "Hammy" Hamilton in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida.

Some labs prepare dogs for adoption through house-training but that's not true in all cases. The adopter may not know how the dog was used, or whether the dog will have health problems resulting from the experiments. And unfortunately, these adoptions represent a small fraction of the animals bred for science. Most laboratory dogs are euthanized so that researchers can study their tissue and organs.

So, Hammy is one of the lucky ones. The Envigo dogs dodged a bullet as well. With the exception of the breeding dogs, these 4,000 beagles in Cumberland were on track to be sold into testing and research. Instead, they are headed to homes.

But even though they'll never be used in a lab, as Hammy was, they did spend every day of their lives in an unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy environment. And because of that, some of these dogs will have special needs. I say this not to dissuade anyone from adopting, but to prepare potential adopters for what they might face.

I adopted Hammy in the summer of 2013. In the first months, he was frightened of everything, including reflections in sliding glass doors and leaves falling on sidewalks.

For years, he trembled when he visited new places or heard sounds like dings and rings. He learned to climb stairs, hop on a couch and forage for treats. In time, he came out of his shell and gained confidence. Today Hammy is, for the most part, a happy soul. We share a bond I've never experienced with another dog.

If you're considering adopting one of the Envigo dogs (or another dog who had a difficult past—who was perhaps abused, neglected or abandoned), you may be donning your patience cap for a while. You may agonize over how to make your dog feel safe and content. Keep an open mind about the individual you're bringing into your life. Some will be self-assured and adapt quickly. Others will be visibly traumatized and fearful of much of the outside world, maybe even of humans.

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Remember that, like us, each dog has a unique story and personality. Take the time to listen to them. You may discover reserves of compassion you didn't know you had. When I adopted Hammy, I remember thinking that every day of his new life was a gift. And I still feel that way, almost 3,300 days later.

When you adopt your beagle, I hope every day of your life together is a gift too – for both of you. I hope at night you have a beagle in the crook of your arm. And if you lie awake, I hope you count beagles. There's no sweeter way to fall asleep.

If you're interested in adopting or fostering a beagle from the Envigo facility, contact one of the shelter or [rescue partners](#) of The Humane Society of the United States.

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