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## New dog racks up a big vet bill

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Imagine the emotional pain of nursing a sick puppy that you believe a pet store has passed off as a healthy dog, not to mention the tiny creature's suffering -- and the vet costs.

Christine Margiotta of Schenectady and her fiance bought a 5-month-old Japanese Chin (a little dust mop of a dog, kind of like a Shih Tzu) from The Pet Company, a store in Rotterdam Square Mall, in late March. They paid \$388 plus tax for him on March 28. They took him home and named him Shamus.

The next day, Shamus developed a cough and Margiotta took him to the vet. The diagnosis was kennel cough, also known as Bordetella, a common illness for which dogs in tight quarters are routinely inoculated. It's possible someone forgot to give Shamus his medicine.

As long as they kept an eye on him, Margiotta was told, Shamus would eventually recover. But he got worse. The next week he was back to the doctor for a second round of antibiotics. After he continued to go downhill, acting listless and with a nagging cough, they took him to an emergency veterinarian, where Shamus stayed for two days. By now, the vet bills had climbed to over \$900. Animals get sick. But this dog was clearly sick before Margiotta took him home, their vet said. He shouldn't have been sold in his condition. But Shamus was listed as "fit for sale" on his papers at the pet store. Now Margiotta and her fiance have asked The Pet Company for full reimbursement of their vet bills. But they are concerned they might not get everything they are looking for.

Margiotta was told by a customer service representative that the company typically only reimburses customers up to the value of the puppy.

That's not fair.

I spoke to a Pet Company employee on Tuesday who wasn't familiar with Margiotta's case and referred me to the company's corporate headquarters. A corporate spokesperson did not respond to two calls for comment. Margiotta submitted paperwork to the company last week to get a full refund, but said she'd like some assurance that she won't have a hard time getting it.

Kathleen Summers, an expert on puppy mills for the Humane Society of the United States, said stories like Margiotta's are common.

she said, a puppy from a pet store has spent a week or two in a cage at the store, another week packed into a crate on a truck, and the first weeks of its life in crowded, unsanitary conditions with possibly hundreds of other dogs and improper veterinary care.

"That's why we recommend people go to shelters or rescue groups," where there are fewer dogs and no profit motive. These organizations also try to match dogs with appropriate owners, unlike pet stores which are frequently just trying to make a sale. Summers said pet buyers can also consider reputable breeders where you can visit the premises and see under what conditions puppies are bred.

Meanwhile, Shamus is on the mend. The dog is feeling better every day and even has his appetite back. Margiotta said Shamus is the last pet she will ever purchase from a pet store. "I'm glad I could give one of these dogs a good home," she said, "... but I've learned my lesson."

Following up

Another investigation has been concluded following an Advocate column. The state Labor Department investigated Beaux Visages Day Spa in the Latham Farms shopping center for unpaid wages. The business closed Feb. 29 after struggling for several months to make payroll. The Labor Department launched an investigation and has assessed owner Alan Jones a penalty of \$11,000, plus another \$11,000 in unpaid wages. The labor commissioner herself called Jones' behavior "reprehensible."

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