

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 5, 2021

The Honorable Rebecca Kelly Slaughter
Acting Chair
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20580

Dear Acting Chair Slaughter,

I write to raise attention to the drastic rise in online scams preying on pet lovers seeking animal companionship during the pandemic. I encourage the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to open investigations into those engaging in consumer fraud using pet scams and to make referrals for criminal prosecutions to put an end to these manipulative and costly fraud schemes.

Since the start of the pandemic, consumers have sought new animal friends in their time of loneliness and stress, creating a soaring demand for pets. Scammers seized on this need and flooded online classified sections and marketplaces, such as Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace, with fake advertisements offering adorable puppies and kittens, rare parrots, and purebred dogs for adoption or sale at discounted prices, often claiming to be owners or breeders.¹ These schemes often request an initial upfront ‘adoption’ or ‘shipping’ price to be paid through an electronic payment service, such as Paypal or Venmo, or through gift cards.² Once the victim is on the hook, having already paid hundreds of dollars, the scammers then pile on more supposed costs and fees for delivery, claiming to need the money for health care, certifications, insurance, or transportation. After stealing as much money from consumers as they can, the scammers disappear – no pet in sight and thousands of dollars irretrievably stolen.

The scale of this predation is alarming. According to the Better Business Bureau (BBB), reports of pet scams have increased by around 130% in 2020 compared to the prior years, reaching an estimated 4,300 reports and over \$3 million in fraud loss.³ Consumer advocates,

¹ Christine Hauser, “Puppy Scams Have Spiked in the Pandemic,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/17/us/puppy-scams-covid.html>; Andrea Huspeni, “The Biggest Scam During the Pandemic: Puppies,” *This Dog’s Life*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.thisdogslife.co/the-biggest-scam-during-the-pandemic-puppies/>.

² Hauser, “Puppy Scams.”

³ “Online puppy scams rising sharply in 2020, BBB warns,” *Better Business Bureau*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.bbb.org/article/news-releases/23354-bbb-study-update-puppy-scams-rising-in-2020>.

humane societies, and law enforcement have warned that pet lovers looking for their next companion online are highly likely to encounter fake ads and scams.⁴ In Connecticut alone, at least 77 residents have been scammed during the last year, reporting total losses of more than \$50,000. This is likely the tip of the iceberg in the overall costs on consumers.⁵ In addition to a financial burden, these scams add further emotional hardship on the vulnerable. The BBB and media reports describe how the scammers reprehensibly preyed upon the emotions and needs of people mourning lost relatives, facing financial hardship, and dealing with the social isolation of the pandemic.

I urge the FTC to take steps to ensure that pet scams are fully investigated and to bring its full enforcement authorities against perpetrators of this fraud. I appreciate that the FTC issued early warnings about the potential for scams during the pandemic and provided helpful tips to spot fake advertisers.⁶ However, more information, alerts, and action are needed: fraudsters have adapted and grown more sophisticated, showing themselves to be effective at exploiting consumers. The FTC has the legal ability to stop those engaged in unfair and deceptive practices – including pet scams. As importantly, the FTC through its Criminal Liaison Unit can coordinate with the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorneys, and other federal and state criminal law enforcers to criminally prosecute scammers. I have long called for the FTC to refer cases for criminal prosecution, and I encourage the FTC to ensure that information and evidence about pet scams is provided to law enforcement partners. Sometimes only the threat of jail is the most effective deterrent against consumer fraud.

We should do all that we can to ensure that pet lovers and families do not have to fear that their new furry friend is actually nothing more than a manipulative financial fraud. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Blumenthal". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Richard" being the most prominent part.

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

⁴ “Consumer scam: Internet pet sales,” *The Humane Society of the United States*, n.d., <https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/consumer-scam-internet-pet-sales> (accessed May 5, 2021).

⁵ Currie Engel, “Pet-buying scams have increased in CT over the last year. Here’s how and where they are happening,” *Ridgefield Press* (Norwalk, CT), April 23, 2021, <https://www.theridgefieldpress.com/local/article/Pet-buying-scams-have-dramatically-increased-in-16124252.php>.

⁶ Namukolo Kasumpa, “Finding a furry friend in the era of COVID-19,” *Federal Trade Commission Consumer Information*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/2020/05/finding-furry-friend-era-covid-19>.