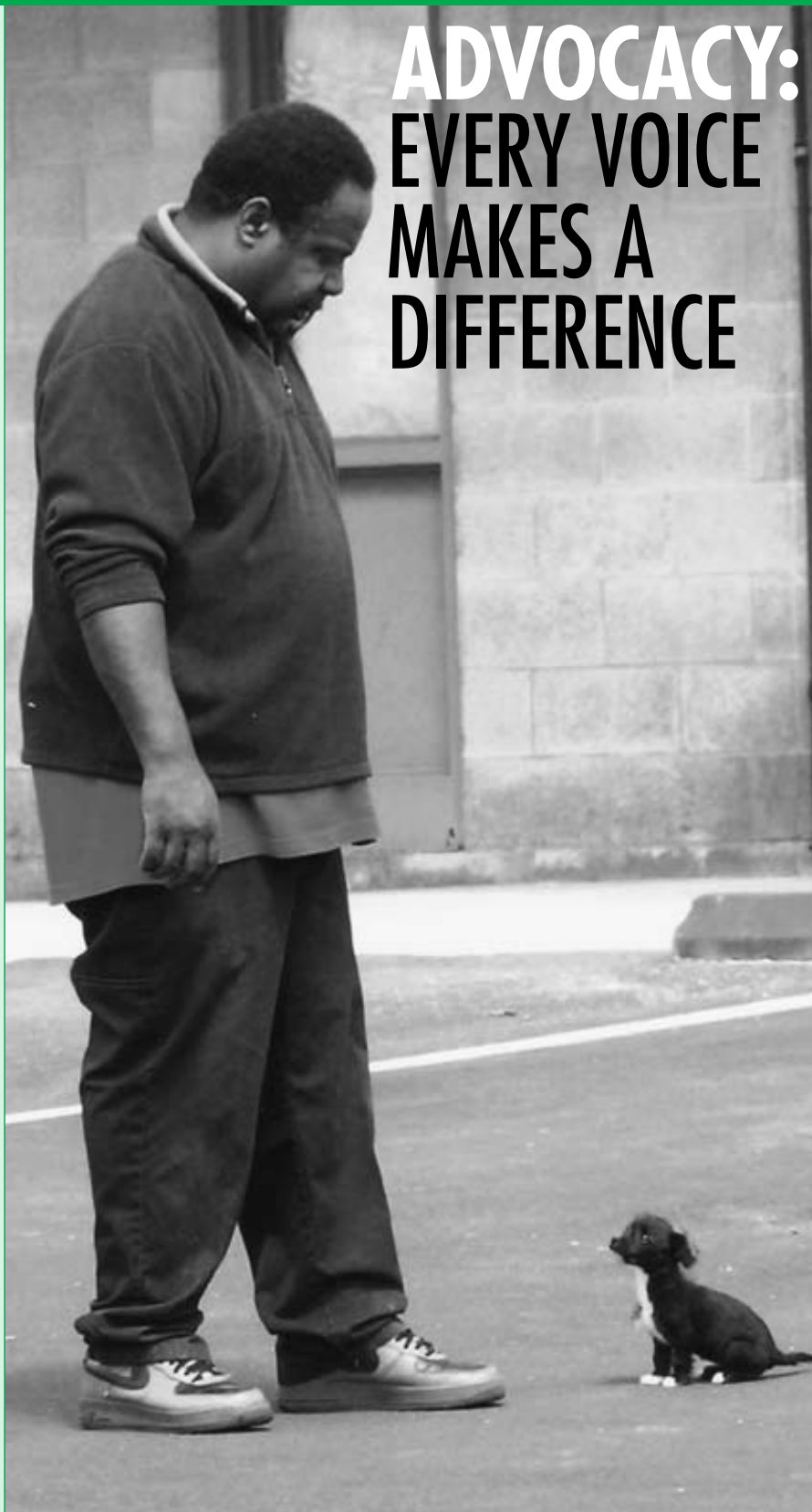


ADVOCACY: EVERY VOICE MAKES A DIFFERENCE



**By Allie Phillips,
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As someone who's dedicated to the well-being of animals, you may wonder what one person can do to positively impact the laws protecting animals. You may wonder whether it's worth your time to advocate for legislation when there are paid lobbyists and large animal welfare organizations that can take up the cause.

YOU MAY QUESTION: WHAT CAN ONE LONE VOICE DO?

From personal experience, I have seen that each person can indeed make a difference and that often it is a sole individual, small animal shelter or unheralded rescue organization that positively changes the policies and laws to protect animals. This is why American Humane works with local animal welfare professionals and concerned citizens on animal welfare legislation. You are the one who knows what is best for your state. It is your voice that is often the most powerful. The following is a real-life example that shows how true this is.

A FEW DEDICATED INDIVIDUALS MAKE A BIG CHANGE

Michigan has battled pound seizure — the practice of taking shelter animals for research — for decades. Michigan state law permits animal shelters to sell their animals to research companies for no more than \$10 per animal. Ending this practice has been a long battle in Michigan that is not yet over. Four counties still allow pound seizure, and campaigns to end the practice are actively underway today in two Michigan counties.

I was directly involved, as a concerned citizen, in the banning of pound seizure at the Ingham County (Michigan) Animal Control Shelter and subsequently in two other counties. I co-founded Friends of Ingham County Animal Shelter (FICAS) in 2000 and soon learned that the shelter sold cats and dogs to a U.S. Department of Agriculture Class B Dealer for resale to research facilities. FICAS consisted primarily of five volunteers who worked tirelessly to get the shelter pets rescued and adopted, while raising community awareness to stop pound seizure. The shelter staff themselves were not in a position to comment on pound seizure.

FICAS worked for approximately three years to stop pound seizure and ran into roadblocks every step of the way. The primary source of resistance came from the county commissioners, but there were battles with university researchers and an animal dealer, as well. For a small group of volunteers who simply cared for animals and wanted the shelter to truly be a “shelter,” the task seemed insurmountable. We were not in a position to stand up to the experts on the legitimacy of animal research. We just knew the practice was wrong, it was a betrayal of public trust and it needed to stop.

We quickly learned that we could not give up. Our small voices grew stronger when we reached out to other concerned citizens in the community through newspaper and website advertisements; and our voices were heard by other shelters and rescue organizations in the state that offered to rescue animals as well as write letters and speak at commission meetings to stop pound seizure. Eventually, FICAS had mobilized thousands of individuals to support the ban on pound seizure.

By holding letter-writing and leaflet campaigns, appearing at commissioner meetings to speak and holding rallies before commission meetings, the small voice of FICAS and its supporters grew into a formidable advocacy machine. In the end, we were successful, and pound seizure was banned from the shelter in June 2003.

But the work did not stop there. The momentum achieved in Ingham County quickly spread to neighboring Jackson County where I worked and shared our experiences with Jackson County Volunteers Against Pound Seizure. A ban on pound seizure was achieved in July 2006. The energy then spread to Eaton County, where a moratorium against pound seizure was put in place in May 2008.

SUCCESS — BUT STILL WORK TO DO

Now the battles continue in Montcalm and Gratiot Counties, where I am helping local citizens and demonstrating what worked and did not work for FICAS. Through my position at American Humane, I am also working to help pass a state bill banning pound seizures. And it all started with a small group of small voices that wanted to make a difference. ■

WHAT CAN ONE PERSON DO? PLENTY!

Sign up for American Humane’s Action Alerts at www.americanhumane.org and take action on legislation that will better the laws in your state.

- Write letters, send emails, make phone calls or schedule meetings with local, state and federal legislators to find out what is being done to make animal protection laws stronger.
- Contact local enforcement agencies to ask what efforts are underway to investigate and pursue animal cruelty cases.
- If a case of cruelty is going unrecognized, do something about it. Call the investigating and prosecuting authorities and ensure that follow-up is being conducted. It may take more than one call to get action.
- Discuss animal protection issues with local media reporters to raise awareness in your community, particularly when situations have gone unaddressed.
- If you volunteer or work in a shelter, create informational materials to educate individuals on what greater legal protections animals need in your community.
- Spread the word to others in your community — even outside the animal welfare world — about the importance of protecting animals.