Los Angeles – Continuing his focus on protecting holiday shoppers, City Attorney Mike Feuer today warned would-be dog dads and dog moms about online puppy-selling scams, which are run by criminal organizations and have increased substantially in recent months. Joined by LA City Animal Services' General Manager Brenda Barnette, and eight-week old Dancer, Dasher and Comet, he encouraged people looking for a new fur-baby to adopt and not shop.

"The cuddly pictures will steal your heart, but the criminals behind these puppy scams will steal your money, sometimes into the thousands," said Feuer. "Most victims who are swindled never get a puppy at all, others get different dogs with health or genetic problems, and the majority of victims are too embarrassed to come forward. Puppy scams are one more reason to adopt and not shop."

“If you are ready to add more love to your life and are considering a new dog or cat, visit one of our six Los Angeles City Animal Care Centers and meet some of our fantastic shelter guests who are hoping you will give them a home of their own before the holidays,” said Barnette. “The adoption fee for a dog is only $122 and includes vaccinations, a microchip, a city dog license and all pets are spayed or neutered. These great pets will repay you with joy for years to come.”
Puppy selling scams are simple. The scammer purports to offer dogs for sale via a custom website and ads on Facebook, Craigslist and other platforms. They interact with victims by email, text or over the phone to convince them they have a pet to sell. Once the victim is emotionally invested, they are easier to scam.

After the victim pays for the puppy, the scammer creates a website they claim the consumer can use to track the pet’s delivery. The victim is given a bogus tracking number too, which continues to make the scam seem legitimate. But, a day later, the victim typically receives an email saying delivery has been delayed, and that the victim is now on the hook for any number of new fees – delivery fees, cage fees, vaccinations, as well as other charges. The scammers’ delivery website is updated with this information too, which, again, continues to give the impression that the sale is legitimate.

If the victim pays the fees, the scammers often demand additional fees, until the victim either can no longer afford to pay or realizes they’ve been taken. By this time, the loss to the victim could be in the thousands.

Once the victim stops paying, the scammers sometimes threaten them with “animal abandonment.” Some will go so far as to create an additional website replicating one from law enforcement to frighten the victim and they will continue to email, text and phone the victim to try to get them to pay more money.

Nationwide, the City Attorney's Office has identified approximately 4,500 complaints about puppy scams and almost 400 in California. According to a report by the BBB, experts believe at least 80% of the sponsored advertising links that appear in an internet search for pets may be fraudulent. These scams are common for cats, horses and birds, too.

City Attorney Feuer offers the following red flags to avoid being puppy-scammed:

- The asking price is far below the normal rate for that breed.
- The seller won't let you meet the puppy in person or see him on a video call.
- The seller insists on shipping the pup and won't let you pick him up in person.
- The seller requires payment by money transfer, such as Western Union, prepaid debit cards or via Zelle, an app that consumers have reported has been unwilling to refund fees for fraudulent transactions with puppy scammers.
- Pictures of the puppy or the text of the ad can be found on other sites – use Google image search to check for other sites that have the same image of the pet that is being offered.

To search for adoptable dogs and cats sheltered with LA Animal Services, visit them online. For more information on avoiding puppy scams, visit Pet Scams which also has a list of over 8,000 websites they’ve identified as scam sites. You can also check BBB Business Profiles for complaints and customer reviews before you make the purchase as well as doing other internet searches to see if there are complaints about the seller.

Today's announcement follows last week's press event alerting holiday shoppers to be aware of popular gift items that are counterfeit or have been recalled. Fake Apple products, like chargers being sold on Amazon, have a 99% failure rate, and in addition to ruining your phone, carry the risk of shock and electrocution. Alarmingly, the City Attorney's Consumer Protection Unit was able to buy a child's bike helmet – recalled over safety issues in 2017 – on Walmart's website. After alerting Walmart, the product was removed.


About Mike Feuer
Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer has long been one of California's leading lawyers and lawmakers. As LA's chief lawyer and prosecutor since July, 2013, he has brought an innovative, problem-solving focus that combines tough and effective prosecution with initiatives to improve public safety and the quality of life throughout the city. Feuer's office also has been at the forefront of key national issues ranging from gun violence prevention and consumer protection to justice system reform and challenges to recent federal policies that threaten fundamental rights, public health and public safety. Follow @CityAttorneyLA