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Fangs bared over 'rent-a-dog'

Fido-for-hire service facing legislative ban

By Ellie Oleson CORRESPONDENT

A company may be barking up the wrong state with its plan to open a dog-rental business in Boston. Legislation has been filed to ban such businesses in Massachusetts.

Marlena Cervantes, 30, of Big Sky, Mont., is the owner of FlexPetz, which she described as "a unique concept for dog lovers who are unable to own a pet, but miss spending time with a dog."

She said she founded FlexPetz last year and plans to expand internationally this year.

It all began in her native San Diego, where she worked as a behavior specialist with autistic children who did not interact with others until they met her dog.

"Parents were stunned to see their children, who never initiated social contact, initiate play with my dog," Ms. Cervantes said.

Many of the parents asked that her dog come for visits.

"That's how I came up with the idea of dog rentals," Ms. Cervantes said.

Last March she started a pilot program in San Diego, with only word-of-mouth advertising. By June, she had a waiting list of potential clients in San Diego and Los Angeles.

Most interest was from professionals living in metropolitan areas.

"They had the money but not the time to own a pet full time," Ms. Cervantes said.

There are no brick-and-mortar FlexPetz offices; instead, the operation is run out of existing dog day-care centers.

Clients pay a \$299 startup fee, including the first month's rental in advance, and \$49.95 per month, plus an additional fee each time they take out a dog. The clients must make a minimum one-year commitment.

"In New York, they want toy breeds. In California, they want larger animals. We visit shelters and seek out dogs with an appropriate temperament. Many are owner surrenders. We screen for happy, friendly dogs that are very social," Ms. Cervantes said.

Before a dog is rented, FlexPetz performs a home visit and screens the client, who must sign a PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) form.

"The dogs are never in a kennel. They are in a high-end center, with room for them to run with their pack. They are fed, taken out on walks and remain active and engaged," Ms. Cervantes said.

She said it is not at all uncommon for clients to become attached to a dog and adopt it.

As the dogs age, they will be placed in homes.

"I assume all responsibility for the dogs and will not euthanize," Ms. Cervantes said.

She has operations in San Diego, New York and Los Angeles, with waiting lists in Washington, D.C., London and in Boston, where she said more than potential clients have signed up.

"We'll probably be in Boston by midsummer," she said.

Maybe not.

State Rep. Paul K. Frost, R-Auburn, and state Sen. Edward M. Augustus Jr., D-Worcester, filed legislation Feb. 21 to ban pet rentals in Massachusetts. Also signing were Sen. Robert A. Antonioni, D-Leominster; Rep. Bradford Hill, R-Ipswich; and Reps. John P. Fresolo, D-Worcester, Stephen R. Canessa, D-New Bedford; Cheryl A. Coakley-Rivera, D-Springfield; Thomas P. Kennedy, D-Brockton; Denis E. Guyer, D-Dalton; Kay S. Khan, D-Newton; Denise Provost, D-Somerville; Jennifer M. Callahan, D-Sutton; and William N. Brownsberger, D-Belmont.

"The legislation is in the House Committee on Rules. It prohibits the business of renting dogs and cats. I have not heard of a legitimate business like this. The MSPCA and dog officers in other towns oppose this business," Mr. Frost said. Guide dogs and working dogs are exempted. Mr. Frost said he is a dog lover and owner of a chocolate Labrador retriever named Reeses and a golden retriever named Snickers.

"I know what kind of bond there is with a dog. You don't rent out members of your family," he said.

"I normally side with the free market, which dictates what is successful, but this is breaking new ground. Concerns are valid. The legislation deserves a public hearing. Let's give the company a chance to show the benefits of this business, and let's give a voice to those who have concerns. Are we fostering disposable pets? I'm not sure that fosters responsibility."

Mr. Frost said he was first contacted on this issue by Auburn Dog Officer Kathleen M. Sabina, who yesterday said she is appalled by the FlexPetz concept.

"I can't think of a dog that would flourish in that situation. These people want an animal but no responsibility. I'm furious about this. There's a lot of money to be made exploiting animals," she said.

She suggested that potential renters instead "help an elderly neighbor with their dog, walk a friend's dog or volunteer at a shelter. Animals need consistency. Each person expresses love differently. In my mind, this is like rent-a-kid. If you wouldn't rent your child, don't rent a dog. We have enough bad dog owners. We don't need bad dog renters."

Paul Waldau, director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in Grafton, said, "I think renting dogs is a sad idea."

He applauded Ms. Cervantes for working with autistic children, but said of FlexPetz: "This isn't therapeutic, it's commercial. The happy, friendly dogs they take from the shelter would seem to be the ones that would be adopted first. We would be appalled if this was done to children."

Jo Jacques, a certified dog behavior consultant in Salem, said, "Anyone who cares about companion animals is opposed to FlexPetz. If people want to spend time with an animal, shelters are crying out for volunteers."

FlexPetz also offers customers contact online with virtual pets on "FlexPetz Island," and has a Canine Ambassador Program, which so far has just one dog, Rupert, a black Afghan, who visits with clients of the upscale Keating Hotel in San Diego.

His handler is FlexPetz employee Michael Pell, who grew up in Holden and Worcester and spent time at his grandfather Fred Watson's farm in Paxton before moving to California.

"Rupert and I are together 24-7. I'm his chauffeur, sanitary engineer and groomer. We will work together, then we will retire together. He has quite a fan base, and is a wonderful ambassador promoting the hotel," Mr. Pell said.

"Some people feel FlexPetz is cruel to animals. I absolutely disagree. I wish Rupert could testify. He wouldn't give up this gig for anything."

Ray McSoley, owner of Animal Behavior Associates in Westwood, said, "I have no problem with ambassador dogs at hotels, but renting a dog is a four-legged escort service. It devalues all parties. It promotes the whole concept of no commitment. They take the most adoptable dogs out of a shelter, suck all the positive energy out of them for two years, then put them up for adoption. It's a horrible idea."

Ms. Cervantes said she would “definitely come to Boston” to speak at any hearing before the Legislature on the dog-rental business.

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