

Lessons from April 18

A Postmortem on the Ridgland Farms Mass Open Rescue Action

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Executive Summary

On April 18, 2026, approximately one thousand activists from across the United States and abroad converged on Ridgland Farms in Blue Mounds, Wisconsin, in an open attempt to rescue beagles bred for research. The action was met with seventeen coordinated law-enforcement agencies, tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. Roughly twenty-five participants were arrested, including many members of senior leadership in the first minutes. Dozens were injured. No dogs were rescued.

This report assesses what the evidence — participant debriefs, press accounts, and the established literature on social-movement strategy — identifies as the operational and strategic causes of the shortfall, and translates those causes into six lessons for the future of open rescue. Findings are presented in a standardized format: Issue, Evidence, Recommendation.

The central conclusion is that April 18 produced two outcomes simultaneously: operational failure and strategic progress. Operationally, the action failed to extract beagles, and several specific judgment calls — including my own — contributed materially to that failure. Strategically, the action produced unprecedented public attention, mass mobilization of new participants, and political openings the movement did not previously have. Both outcomes are real.

The lessons below are designed to preserve the strategic gains while correcting the operational errors before the July 1 deadline imposed by Ridgland's reported transition plans. The six findings concern (1) leadership redundancy, (2) ensuring team cohesion, (3) the separation of values-transparency from tactical-transparency, (4) pre-committed contingency and negotiation protocols, (5) protective equipment as compatible with nonviolent discipline, and (6) the strategic interpretation of an action that did not achieve its proximate objective.

1. Factual Overview

Ridgland Farms is a USDA-licensed breeding facility in Blue Mounds, Wisconsin, holding approximately two thousand beagles bred for sale to academic and pharmaceutical research clients. The April 18 action followed a multi-month campaign that included the Defending Compassion Summit (March 13–15, 2026), formal legal demand letters to Dane County and Ridgland, and an open public mobilization through savethedogs.io. The campaign was deliberately transparent in its public-facing framing, including announced training and action dates.

On the morning of April 18, participants encountered a fortified perimeter — a manure-filled trench, hay bales, barbed wire — and a multi-agency law-enforcement response that included less-lethal munitions deployed within the first hour. Senior leadership, including the author, was arrested in the opening minutes. National and international press, including the New York Times,

CNN, the Associated Press, the Guardian, Democracy Now, and Fox News, covered the action. A sitting United States Congressman raised the matter in a House Appropriations hearing the following week. A public negotiation thread emerged on April 18 itself when Lara Trump publicly endorsed a one-million-dollar offer from Big Dog Ranch Rescue and the Center for a Humane Economy to purchase the dogs. The findings below address what worked, what did not, and what should change.

2. Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1. Leadership was over-concentrated at the front of the action and was decapitated within the first hour.

Issue. The most consequential operational failure of April 18 was the rapid removal of senior coordinators from the field. The author and several other senior leads were arrested in the opening minutes, before most participants had reached their assigned positions. Communication redundancy was inadequate: a single primary WhatsApp channel had reached its 2,000-member cap; cell service at the site was poor; team leads in the field had no reliable backchannel to surviving leadership. The result was that hundreds of participants were attempting to coordinate a high-risk action without the people they had been instructed to follow.

Evidence. Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe's research on High-Reliability Organizations — aircraft carriers, nuclear plants, wildland-fire incident command — identifies redundancy of authority and *preoccupation with failure* as the two strongest predictors of survival in operations where small errors cascade. The Incident Command System (ICS) used by FEMA and federal land-management agencies is built on the explicit premise that the lead must be replaceable without operational interruption. Participant debriefs identify the loss of leadership in the opening minutes as the single most-cited cause of the on-site breakdown.

Recommendation. Future open rescues will adopt an ICS-style command structure. Senior coordinators will set the moral and public tone of the action in the days and hours preceding the operation, but on the day of the action will hold positions designed to preserve their operational tenure for as long as possible. A second and third marshal will be publicly designated, trained, and rehearsed, each with full authority — including authority to pivot tactics or stand down — in the event the first marshal is removed. Communication redundancy will include at least three independent channels, including a dedicated set of two-way radios on segregated channels reserved for command and breach teams. No single point of failure — no single channel, no single device, no single person — will be permitted in the command architecture.

Finding 2. Team cohesion was the binding constraint on operational performance, and it was insufficient.

Issue. A substantial proportion of participants arrived at the action having never met their assigned team or team lead in person. Color assignments shifted in the final 24–48 hours. Some teams that had trained together held formation and mutual aid under fire; others fragmented within minutes of arrival. Participants reported being unable to locate their team, their lead, or each other after dispersal at the staging area.

Evidence. Doug McAdam's study of recruitment to Mississippi Freedom Summer (1988; *American Journal of Sociology*, 1986) demonstrated that the strongest predictor of who actually participated in a high-risk action — controlling for ideology, prior activism, and biographical availability — was the density of an applicant's strong-tie interpersonal connections to other participants. Withdrawals had, on average, fewer than half the network ties of those who went. Subsequent literature on high-risk activism has consistently replicated this finding. Cohesion is not an aesthetic preference; it is the operational foundation on which everything else rests.

Recommendation. Future open rescues will treat in-person team cohesion as a high priority for participation in higher risk roles. In-person meetings will be prioritized. This will lower the achievable headcount; that trade is acceptable. Team color assignments will be locked at minimum 72 hours before the action, with no last-minute reassignments except by the lead's exception.

Finding 3. Operational openness exceeded what the action could absorb, but the strategic case for transparency remains strong.

Issue. The campaign's public-facing transparency — announced dates, announced location, public training schedule, public mobilization through savethedogs.io — gave law enforcement and the facility's private security weeks to fortify, coordinate, and pre-position. Participant debriefs identify this as a serious operational cost. At the same time, the same transparency drove the recruitment of approximately 2,000 sign-ups, generated top tier national and international press, and produced political openings (including statements from Representative Mark Pocan and Lara Trump) that a covert action could not have produced.

Evidence. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011), and Chenoweth's later quantitative work, finds that nonviolent campaigns succeed at roughly twice the rate of violent ones, and that the strongest predictors of success are mass participation, tactical diversity, and the loyalty shifts in security forces and elites that follow visible state overreach. Surprise is not on that list. The historical record of nonviolent civil disobedience — Gandhi at Dandi, the Birmingham campaign of 1963, the Selma march — is uniformly characterized by advance announcement of intent. The strategic value of transparency is to invite the moral confrontation, not to evade it.

Recommendation. Future open rescues will distinguish between values-transparency (mandatory) and tactical-transparency (limited). The campaign will continue to be radically public about who we are, what we believe, why we are doing this, and that we are doing it. The campaign will not be public about specific operational details — exact timing, breach points, equipment loadouts, sequencing, headcount — but it will tell people why they're not being given information, if that information is being held private. The savethedogs.io public face will be preserved. Information will be disclosed to participants in a graduated schedule keyed to their team's role.

Finding 4. The action lacked rehearsed contingency protocols, including for negotiation.

Issue. Senior leadership, including the author, communicated a confident expectation in the weeks before April 18 that police would not deploy force at scale. That expectation rested on cordial conversations with the Dane County Sheriff and on a reading of the political optics. It was wrong. When the original breach plan failed within the first hour, no rehearsed Plan B existed. There was

no pre-committed pivot to a sit-in, no scripted retreat-with-optics, no defined fallback rendezvous, no authority designated to make the call. The action wound down without a clear ask, a clear answer, or a clear commitment.

Evidence. The high-risk operation literature treats *preoccupation with failure* as a defining attribute of organizations that operate reliably in high-stakes environments. The civil rights movement's nonviolent training tradition, documented by Bruce Hartford and others, included extensive scenario rehearsal — what to do if attacked, what to do if leaders are arrested, what to do if media coverage collapses, what to do if the original plan becomes infeasible. These rehearsals were not pessimism; they were fidelity to participants. April 18 lacked them.

Recommendation. Future open rescues will include written, rehearsed contingency protocols for at least the following scenarios: (a) the breach plan fails and entry is impossible; (b) senior leadership is removed within the first hour; (c) participants are subjected to chemical or kinetic force; (d) a credible negotiation offer is presented during the action; (e) media coverage is suppressed or reframed adversely. Each protocol will specify the triggering condition, the designated decision-maker, the alternative tactic, and the communication path to participants. The negotiation protocol will pre-commit, in writing, to the specific terms under which the campaign will and will not accept partial outcomes.

Finding 5. Protective equipment was discouraged on optic grounds; the optic concern was misjudged, and participants paid the cost.

Issue. In the weeks before April 18, leadership communicated a preference that participants not bring gas masks, respirators, or hard eye protection, on the theory that such gear would visually compromise the campaign's nonviolent framing and would escalate police response. When tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets were deployed, large numbers of participants were unable to remain in the field. Some experienced significant medical consequences. The medical team itself was under-resourced and under-identified.

Evidence. The historical record on nonviolent discipline does not support the framing of protective equipment as a betrayal of nonviolence. Bruce Hartford's documentation of CORE, SCLC, and SNCC training in the early 1960s describes a *tactical* component of nonviolent training — how to protect the head from a billy club, how to extract a comrade from a fire-hose stream, how to breathe through a wet cloth — sitting alongside the philosophical component. The optic that ultimately reached the public on April 18 was not of activists in protective gear; it was of unprotected people, including a disabled grandmother, being attacked. That optic could have been preserved with eye protection in place. The attempt to optimize for an aesthetic of vulnerability traded participant safety for a visual that the action would have had regardless.

Recommendation. Future open rescues should treat eye protection, respiratory protection, and trained, clearly identified medical personnel as recommended or at least optional equipment for all participants. A pre-action training module on chemical-weapon response (decontamination, eye flushing, contamination protocols for transport vehicles and rescued animals) will be required for all participants. Medical personnel will be visibly identified. The campaign will be publicly transparent in advance that this gear is being brought, and why.

Finding 6. The strategic outcome of April 18 is positive and should be read in the long arc of social-movement development.

Issue. Participant debriefs, internal sentiment, and some external commentary characterize April 18 as a defeat. That characterization is operationally accurate (no dogs were rescued) but strategically incomplete. The same day produced the largest national and international press footprint the modern open-rescue movement has generated; mass radicalization of approximately one thousand new high-risk activists; political engagement from a sitting U.S. Congressman and a member of the presidential family; and a documented record of state overreach against peaceful actors that will be useful in litigation and public pressure.

Evidence. Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan, developed over forty years of work on the civil rights, anti-Vietnam, and anti-nuclear movements, identifies a stage in nearly every successful movement that he termed *Perception of Failure* (Stage 5), which characteristically follows a major take-off action and precedes mass public support. Activists in this stage typically conclude that the movement has failed precisely because they overestimate what a single action was supposed to accomplish and underestimate the public-opinion shift that has just occurred. Moyer's claim, supported by the historical record from Birmingham 1963 to Standing Rock, is that Stage 5 is the most common point at which movements abandon themselves on the verge of breakthrough. Erica Chenoweth's later quantitative work supports the same conclusion: what predicts movement success is not the proximate outcome of any single action, but the compounding of participation, tactical diversity, and elite defections over time. McAdam's longitudinal data on Freedom Summer participants further indicates that individuals who have completed a single high-risk action are substantially more likely to participate in subsequent ones — i.e., the thousand people in that field are now the operational base of future open rescues.

Recommendation. Future open rescue communications, internal and external, should frame April 18 as a take-off, not a defeat. This is not a morale exercise; it is an accurate reading of the evidence. The campaign will pair this framing with concrete operational corrections (Findings 1 through 5) so that the framing is credible. Resource allocation in the next sixty days will prioritize: (a) supply-chain pressure on Ridgman's institutional buyers; (b) political escalation through Representative Pocan's office and other allied legislators; (c) a smaller, more cohesive, better-trained rescue posture for the window before July 1; and (d) sustained engagement with the approximately one thousand new high-risk activists who participated, who are now the most strategically valuable asset the movement has.

3. Accountability

Several of the judgment calls assessed in this report were mine. The decision to move forward with the action on Saturday (rather than Friday or Sunday) was mine. The decision to communicate confidence that police would not use force at scale was mine. The decision to publish operational details alongside values was mine. I am sorry for the harm those calls produced, and I owe a particular apology to participants who were injured, or who otherwise were not adequately prepared for police violence. I commit to being accountable for those mistakes partly by improving future action plans. Accountability is not paralysis. The corrections in this report are specific, implementable, and will be implemented before the next action.

4. The Next Phase

The recommendations above translate into a posture that differs from April 18 along five dimensions: command redundancy and ICS-style structure; a focus on team cohesion; transparency with more thoughtful communications strategies; written, rehearsed contingency and negotiation plans; and recommended protective equipment and trained medical capacity. The future of open rescue will also broaden the tactical portfolio beyond rescue: institutional divestment by Ridgman's buyers, environmental and zoning litigation, whistleblower incentives, and sustained political pressure are complementary, not alternative, lines of effort. The strategic objective remains unchanged: the rescue and rehoming of the beagles currently held at Ridgman Farms and at other experimentation facilities across the nation. The deadline is real. The base of activists is real. The public attention is real. What is asked of future participants is not a repetition of April 18, but a more disciplined continuation of the campaign that day made possible.