



Deputies execute search warrant at Memphis Animal Shelter

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MEMPHIS, TN (WMC-TV) - Shelby County sheriff's deputies executed a search warrant Tuesday as part of an investigation into alleged animal cruelty at the Memphis Animal Shelter.

Under dark, rainy skies, Shelby County Sheriff Mark Luttrell, along with deputies and forensic ASPCA investigators from Florida, searched the long troubled shelter.

"We're reaching out to some of the animal shelters across Shelby County to assist in this process," Luttrell said.

According to the search warrant, "detectives have learned that some animals have been deprived of food and water while at the Memphis Animal Shelter," and while in the shelter's care, "some dogs have been starved to the point of requiring euthanasia."

The warrant also alleges that dogs that should be quarantined for rabies are being housed with dogs that are not required to be quarantined.

Memphis Mayor AC Wharton's first official act took him to the shelter.

"When you're working on something and helping somebody or in this case some creature who can't speak up or tell you, that's what they elect us for," Wharton said.

District Attorney Bill Gibbons said an investigation into practices at the shelter was launched after his office received a tip from a citizen earlier this month.

"We're looking at anyone that we have possible evidence on from top to bottom," Gibbons said.

As dawn broke, deputies turned away employees and shut down daily operations at the shelter to clear the way for investigators. Animals brought to the shelter Tuesday were taken to other facilities in Shelby County.

"This is not a matter of accusing any employee of any criminal activity," Wharton said. "It's just to facilitate the investigation. There are a number of medical officials in there. They'll need free and full access to the facility and the records."

Officials said trained ASPCA investigators from the Michael Vick case were flown in to assist investigators. Senior ASPCA forensic investigator Dr. Melinda Merck will lead the team.

"With the Michael Vick case, I went to the scene and excavated animals," she said. "But then I may analyze the remains that we find from a grave, so it's a variety of things that we do."

Merck's team, who flew to Memphis from Florida, will check protocols and determine if the shelter followed laws with euthanasia drugs, determine if a crime was committed, and who knew about it.

"It does require a very solid investigation and it requires a lot of resources, which is very difficult for any investigation, so I commend Memphis," she said.

Merck said city cases are much different than busting Vick's dog fighting ring.

"When dealing with a city government contract shelter there are multiple people involved, multiple managers, layers of responsibility, so that takes a lot of sensitivity," she said.

Merck's team will also give the city recommendations to prevent future problems at the pound.

Gibbons said one or more people could face criminal charges. Up to 300 animals were inside the shelter, but officials did not say how many were in bad condition.

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