

Shelter board member says complaints of animal starvation, disease unheeded

By Cindy Wolff

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For more than a year, shelter officials were told about fatally sick, injured or malnourished animals that sometimes keeled over dead in cages at Memphis Animal Services.

They were told about how some animals were starving in cages with more dominant animals that would eat all the food.

Cindy Marx-Sanders, who was appointed to the shelter's advisory board by then-Mayor Pro Tem Myron Lowery, spent a year before her appointment and the two months after telling shelter administrator Ernie Alexander and his director about problems at the shelter located at 3456 Tchulahoma.

"Nothing was ever done," Marx-Sanders said. "I've brought in complaints, numerous complaints with specific employees, cage numbers; everything they needed, and still nothing was done."

She wasn't the only one complaining. Volunteers and other citizens have called and written City Hall about problems at the shelter for years. One of the tips led to the search warrant executed Tuesday by the Shelby County Sheriff's Office and the District Attorney's Office to investigate charges of animal abuse and cruelty, something the shelter is supposed to police for the city.

Sheriff's deputies continued to keep control of the shelter Wednesday while 14 members of two national groups tended and examined the 291 animals there. A dozen members of the American Humane Red Star Animal Emergency Services were sent by the group to care for the animals.

The American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals sent two investigators including a forensic veterinarian, Dr. Melinda Merck, to gather evidence. Also, the ASPCA sent its Mobile Animal Crime Scene Investigation Unit to Memphis. The vehicle and investigators were part of the team that collected evidence used to convict NFL quarterback Michael Vick in a dog-fighting case.

Both organizations paid all the expenses of their groups to help with the inquiry.

Investigators are expected to be finished sometime today. The sheriff's office will turn the shelter back over to the city, said sheriff's spokesman Steve Shular.

The district attorney general's office will review the evidence and possibly send it to a grand jury. Some animals "were deprived of food and water to the point of euthanasia," according to a portion of the search warrant released Tuesday.

The district attorney's office said it couldn't release the full search warrant Wednesday because it's part of an active investigation.

Ten shelter employees and administrator Ernest Alexander were relieved of duty Tuesday. It's unclear if they will return to work once the city regains control.

Thirty more dogs were brought into the shelter by animal control officers on Wednesday. The sheriff's department is asking people to refrain from bringing in dogs to surrender while the shelter is under investigation.

No animals have been euthanized since the sheriff's office took control of the shelter, Shular said.

The shelter euthanized an average of 258 animals a week last year because of its high intake, up 6 percent from the previous year.

The largest increase was in the number of animals that died in their cages. Figures from the shelter show a 62 percent increase over the last two years, or 193 dogs and cats that died in their cages in 2008 compared with 75 in 2006 and 119 in 2007.

"The shelter needs to do a better job of assessing the animals' condition at intake," said volunteer Jeanne Chancellor, who goes to the shelter every day to log the animals there and take their pictures for the Internet.

"If an animal is so severely compromised that it can't eat, drink or even stand, it needs to be humanely euthanized on the spot," she said. "I've personally stood at a cage of an animal that can barely move and was clearly suffering and told them, 'I'm not leaving until someone euthanizes or treats it.'"

Alexander has said local ordinances require him to hold strays for 72 hours and make them comfortable.

But the ordinance says: "The administrator in charge of the city animal shelter, or his or her agent, may lawfully destroy immediately, or cause to be destroyed immediately, any animal found to be injured or diseased past recovery."

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