

L.A.'s Animal Services general manager in the doghouse

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

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In an unprecedented show of no-confidence, Los Angeles animal control employees Tuesday called for the resignation of the city's seventh animal shelter manager in 10 years, citing mismanagement and a disregard for employees, animals and public safety.

Animal control employees packed City Hall to call for the heads of Ed Boks, general manager of the Department of Animal Services, and his assistant, Linda Barth.

The employees also filed a petition signed by half the department demanding Boks and Barth resign.

"For some time now, we have expressed a number of concerns about the department regarding public safety, animal welfare, employee safety, and last but not least, the services to the people of Los Angeles," Victor Gordo, chief counsel for the union that represents shelter supervisors, told the City Council.

"We're concerned about the warehousing of

animals, lack of food and care for the animals, no viable law enforcement plan, no viable adoption program.

"The organization as a whole is in chaos."

Boks, who answers directly to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, did not return calls seeking comment. A spokeswoman for the mayor also didn't return calls.

Boks, a former minister, was hired by Villaraigosa in January 2006 to curtail shelter-animal killings, which now stand at roughly 15,000 a year.

"Serving as the general manager of L.A. Animal Services is a difficult job, particularly when personally criticized by anonymous mudslingers," Boks replied on his blog last month to an anonymous critic. "However, every effort I make is dedicated to doing the best job I can for the city and the animals in my care."

But critics said Boks has overfilled the city's expanded city shelter system - designed for up to two dogs per kennel - with up to six.

As a result, critics say dogs and cats attack one another, get sick and must ultimately be put down. This year, euthanasia is up 37 percent, according to Boks' blog on the Animal Services Department Web site.

"Boks and Barth fluctuate between two extremes - warehousing or killing," animal control Officer Stacey Dancy of the East Valley

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Shelter told the council. "They use warehousing to placate those against euthanasia, and when the shelter becomes packed, they blame those who are against warehousing for the euthanasia.

"We have had enough illusions, charades and distrust."

In addition, employees say staffing of field officers has been cut to the bone, leaving areas like the San Fernando Valley with just two officers to patrol about 350 square miles. As a result, more animals now roam the streets.

An estimated 60 uniformed animal control employees filled half the council chambers Tuesday, joining animal welfare groups in a mutual alliance of support.

The petition to remove Boks and his assistant was signed by 30 of 32 supervisors, 31 of 64 animal control officers and 74 of 152 animal care technicians.

Some said it was too early to tell if the latest salvo against Boks would cost him his job.

Five council members called Tuesday for a full public hearing on employee and citizen complaints. Councilman Dennis Zine filed a motion for a hearing in the Personnel Committee, expected within two months.

"I've had my issues with Boks' management activities and the shelters that were ill-equipped to maintain custody of the animals," Zine said. "I believe these employees' concerns have

legitimacy."

Zine emphasized he would not accept any retribution against shelter workers as a result of the petition.

Six weeks ago, Councilman Tony Cardenas formally requested Boks answer why six of the city's eight spay-neuter clinics sit vacant.

In addition, he asked about the feasibility of outsourcing the volunteer program at East Valley Shelter to replace a city program in complete disarray.

He said Boks has failed to cooperate with any of his motions.

"The buck stops with Boks," said Cardenas, a leading advocate for city animal welfare programs. "I'm frustrated that, as a councilman and policymaker, I am not getting the kind of response we need."

"It frustrates the council, it frustrates the workers, and it certainly gets me upset."

Boks, who had claimed to lower animal deaths as head dogcatcher in greater Phoenix and New York City, was hired to replace Guerdon Stuckey, fired after a storm of protest by animal welfare activists.

The fifth general manager in five years, he aimed to boost the beleaguered department and fulfill a "no kill" mandate by increasing adoptions and reaching out to rescue groups.

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But unlike a long string of embattled predecessors, Boks took no quarter from critics. He fired up a blog. He hit the radio.

Then he soon became mired in one embarrassing controversy after another, from a proposed "Hooters for Neuters" bikini benefit to a pit-bull academy by ex-convicts.

While Boks has reduced euthanasia, critics said he has deceived the city by claiming a 95 percent "no kill" rate while lumping healthy animals in sick or unruly categories, killing 17,400 dogs and cats in the fiscal year ending in July. During the same period, 1,100 animals died in overcrowded shelters.

"Boks is warehousing pets because of the no-kill mandate," said former Animal Services Commissioner Laura Beth Heisen. "But the warehousing leads to cage craziness, and passing diseases, and more animals are killed because they have become hurt or sick."

Jennifer Pryor, who founded a rescue group with her late husband and comedian Richard Pryor, said the nation's second-largest city deserves better.

"The rescue community will not tolerate the inhumane conditions for which these dogs are held," said Pryor, of Encino. "It's warehouse or kill. It's horrible."

City shelter workers cited a litany of complaints - from a lack of viable adoption programs to no leash enforcement - in asking for a new Animal

Services leader.

"We've waited too long to speak out while Mr. Boks is in office," said Jacob Miller, an animal care technician at East Valley Shelter, who joined the throng at City Hall. "We need a new person at the top to create a new program, new spay-neuter outreach and ... to create a humane Los Angeles."

dana.bartholomew@dailynews.com 818-713-3730

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