

Kitten Saving Raises Hackles At Va. Shelter

By Abhi Raghunathan
Washington Post Staff Writer
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At least five employees of the Animal Welfare League of Arlington, which has a contract to run the county's animal shelter, left their jobs in April after administrators found out that they had been taking home kittens that were to be euthanized, caring for them, and then bringing them back to be put up for adoption, according to past and present shelter employees.

In some cases, workers falsified documents indicating that the animals actually had been euthanized, those involved said.

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At least three of those involved said they resigned when they were asked to do so.

Linda Willen, the Animal Welfare League's longtime executive director, said in an interview yesterday that after she learned what had occurred, she submitted her own resignation to the board of directors.

The league has yet to act on it, however. Willen said she continues to run the shelter and has asked the board for time to hire new staff and "to fix the situation."

Board President Carol Moylan declined to say when, or if, Willen would step down from the post she has held for 18 years, calling it an internal matter. "She's in the middle of trying to get everything straightened out," Moylan said. "We all feel that she has done a great job."

The former employees said they broke the rules because the Arlington shelter, unlike many others, does not have a fostering program in which young or sick animals are cared for in individuals' homes rather than immediately euthanized. Shelters in the District and Fairfax and Montgomery counties, for example, have some type of fostering program.

Willen said she found fostering programs problematic and did not want one at the Arlington shelter. As for euthanizing animals, she said that the decision is made on a case-by-case basis and that not all kittens are euthanized.

All but one of the cases that led to the April departures involved very young kittens.

The other case was that of a 3-month-old pit bull, which former shelter worker Jason Northrop said he took home to keep it from being killed. When the shelter found out, Northrop said, the dog was seized and euthanized the same day.

Some of the former workers said they had altered U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration logs to indicate that they had used drugs to euthanize kittens, when in fact they had taken the animals home from the shelter for foster care. Ramona Leet, the former chief animal care technician at the shelter, said she didn't even bother to dump the drugs, but left them unused.

"What we were doing was not a horrible thing," said Leet. "I cared for them. . . . We were taking them home and bringing them back."

Another former employee, who spoke on condition of not being named, said, "I just couldn't bear to see these little babies dying [just] because they had been born."

A number of people at the shelter had known for years what was going on, even if

administrators did not, the former employees said, jokingly referring to their activities as "a little kitten underground railroad."

After the resignations, several other shelter employees and volunteers also departed, which some of the former workers said calls into question whether there are enough qualified people left to care for the animals.

"It keeps falling apart more and more," Leet said.

Willen said she has already replaced many of the employees who left, but declined to be more specific. She also said the animals' care has not been compromised.

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