

NEWS

PAWS animal shelter settles lawsuit with former employee; settlement confidential



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FORT WALTON BEACH — A lawsuit alleging financial malfeasance filed last year against the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society has been settled.

The settlement between PAWS and former agency employee Manda Moore was reached during a mediation session Friday. PAWS Executive Director Tracey Williams said the terms of the settlement are confidential.

More: PAWS confiscates 77 severely neglected animals from Laurel Hill 'rescue' facility

Also: PAWS lawsuit involving former employee in a whistleblower capacity heads to mediation

"I am unable to comment further," she said in a text message.

Moore served as PAWS' community development director until September 2019, when she was fired, according to the lawsuit, for coming forward in a whistleblower capacity to speak out against fiscal mismanagement.

"Ms. Moore voiced objections to activities she believed to be violations of the law, rule or regulation," the lawsuit, filed Aug. 21, 2020, stated.

It claimed former PAWS Director Dee Thompson misused and misapplied PAWS money and made false statements in order to obtain or retain grant money.

More: PAWS shelter 'not a boarding facility or dumping ground,' works to reduce its population

Thompson resigned unexpectedly in February, citing "personal reasons."

The lawsuit also claims members of the PAWS governing board turned hostile toward Moore when she attended a board meeting and objected to their "using restricted funds for a purpose other than what the funds were supposed to be used."

Williams was hired in June 2020 and has promised to drastically change the way PAWS conducts business. The agency serves both animal control and animal shelter functions for Okaloosa County.

Moore's attorney, Russell Van Sickle, did not respond to a request for comment.

LOCAL

Pensacola Humane Society board accused of mismanagement, misappropriation of funds



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Pensacola News Journal

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A group calling itself We The Organization has issued a public statement critical of the operation of the Pensacola Humane Society and calling for the resignation of Gerald Adcox, the president of the facility's board of directors.

In its statement, the group claims to be comprised of "staff, volunteers and fosters" associated with the Humane Society who have chosen to "take a stand against the board for **mismanagement, misappropriation** and violations to bylaws."

"We The Organization will no longer sit idle in the knowledge of the present financial state of the Pensacola Humane Society nor continue to be governed by those who have failed at being good stewards to Pensacola Humane Society," it said.

In case you missed it: No kill policies combined with bad economy fallout have created an animal shelter crisis in area

Animal abuse case: Pensacola man arrested after 10 puppies were left outside without food and water, killing 3

The statement said We The Organization's public protest was being made under the National Labor Relations Act, the Consumer Financial Protection Act and under **assumed protection of federal Whistleblower laws.**

The group, which provided an email address for media contact, did not respond to a reporter seeking comment.

The statement calls for the immediate resignation of Adcox. It does not name him specifically, but Adcox confirmed he has been board president for several years.

Adcox called the anonymous publishing of the statement disappointing and the accusations unfounded. He said board members met with about 90 Humane Society employees Monday and came away frustrated. No one among the staff, volunteers and fosters who attended the meeting would admit to having anything to do with the comments.

"We were interested in listening, but it turned pretty bombastic," he said. "Certainly if you're going to make comments like this you ought to have guts enough to say 'it's me.'"

Adcox said requests for paperwork from employees to back up their claims were ignored.

"Nobody presented any documentation during the entire two hour meeting," he said.

The We The Organization statement said that the board president had been derelict in his fiduciary duties and was responsible for the **misappropriation of funds**, including grants and money brought in from donors.

It also blames Adcox for failing to respond to a "financial crisis" by waiting 22 days to hold an emergency board meeting to address the Humane Society not meeting payroll and owing more than \$50,000 in back owed invoices, which it claims left the agency's bank account \$11,000 overdrawn.

"We have never missed a payroll. Not once in the history of the company. We have plenty of money," Adcox said in response to the allegation. "We have seven figures in the bank in marketable securities."

Adcox said the Humane Society's finances are publicly available on the IRS.gov website and show the agency to be in good financial health. He denied all of the allegations made against him.

The We The Organization statement also alleges the board president engaged in inappropriate behavior, to include "misogynistic comments, sexual innuendos and inappropriate comments to staff, volunteers and board of directors (members)."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown," Adcox said. "I've been giving them the decisions of the board that they weren't happy about."

He said he suspects a "rogue interim director ... may be the source" of the turmoil roiling the Humane Society staff, but added that work is still being done to confirm the source of the We

The Organization statement.

Manda Moore is the Humane Society's interim executive director. Calls made Monday to the Pensacola Humane Society were not returned. Moore had replaced Jan Castillo within the last couple of weeks. Adcox said Castillo left the Humane Society on good terms.

The Humane Society Board of Directors has engaged the law firm of Emmanuel Sheppard and Condon in response to the publishing of the statement. An attorney for the firm has called upon We The Organization to cease and desist its criticism of the board, Adcox said.

The law firm did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Dozens of dogs: Newest pet hoarding case raises alarms from Panhandle animal service professionals

While calling on the president of the board to resign, We The Organization requested the rest of the board of directors "to recommit to Pensacola Humane Society."

It called for the board to make changes to its bylaws and handbook, uphold promises made to the staff by the previous executive director and board president, and provide transparency to the community.

It said the board should no longer expect staff to work overtime without pay or work multiple roles without fair compensation.

The group called upon board members to conduct a forensic audit and to protect future donor gifts. It also called upon the board to create an annual budget in a timely fashion.

"There is still no approved budget for the fiscal year that got underway three months ago," the statement said.

We The Organization further called upon board members to provide a seat on the board to an active volunteer member and to volunteer to work alongside the staff at the shelter and in fundraising efforts. It asked that the board discontinue the practice of holding lunch meetings at the Pensacola Yacht Club "at a cost of \$475 per meeting."

It also said the board should "no longer insist on increasing adoption prices."

"No animal shelter should try to make money off the backs of their animals," the statement said.

It said the group comprising We The Organization had made a decision between watching the nearly 80-year-old organization "dwindle to nothing" or fight for its survival.

"We chose to fight," the statement said. "We won't abandon our animals or our community as we feel some of our board has abandoned us."