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DOWNTOWN

Pensacola Humane Society director fired; staff clears shelter, plans mass resignation



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The staff of the Pensacola Humane Society worked through the day Wednesday to empty its shelter of animals.

They took the action after learning the agency's board of directors had terminated Manda Moore-Joseph, the Humane Society's director of development. Earlier this month, Moore-Joseph stepped down from her role as the Humane Society's interim executive director.

Aly Martinez, the Humane Society's director of shelter operations and foster coordinator, said many tears were shed as employees of the nonprofit worked to relocate the animals in their care, but the staff felt the governing board had left them no alternative.

More: Pensacola Humane Society board accused of mismanagement, misappropriation of funds

"We asked the board of directors to be transparent with us and they were not. Today they terminated Manda and the rest of us are planning to resign," Martinez said. "We didn't want to leave the animals high and dry so we are moving them to shelters that we have pulled from regularly."

Animal shelters in Escambia County and Santa Rosa counties — counties that the Pensacola Humane Society has "pulled from" by assisting with overcrowding issues in the past — each agreed to take on animals, Martinez said. Okaloosa County's shelter, which is presently in the middle of a major renovation, offered to help where it could as well, she said.

Santa Rosa County spokeswoman Sarah Whitfield confirmed its shelter had assumed the care of 70 cats that had been charges of the Pensacola Humane Society, though all but one of

the cats is presently being cared for by foster families.

Escambia County Animal Shelter Director John Robinson did not respond to requests for comment.

The Pensacola Humane Society Board of Directors voted Tuesday to fire Moore-Joseph, though she said she only learned of her termination Wednesday morning when Board President Gerald Adcox notified her in an email. Moore-Joseph, who had stepped down as interim executive director but remained employed as director of development, was on vacation through the end of the year when she learned of the board's decision.

"It's not surprising," she said of the way the firing was handled. "It's normally what happens."

More: Pensacola Humane Society interim leader raises questions over missing donor funds

Adcox's email contained a letter notifying Moore-Joseph that her employment with the Humane Society had been terminated due to insubordination, failure to follow the terms of employment set forth in policies and procedures and/or the Landrum HR Employee Handbook and "engaging in activities that reflect poorly on the Pensacola Humane Society."

The letter accused Moore-Joseph of stating, both verbally and over social media, things "which negatively impacts the organization's mission."

Board members met with an attorney Wednesday, according to spokesman Carlton Proctor. Afterward it issued a statement.

"Our policy is to not comment on personnel decisions," it said. "We are looking into and investigating any allegations raised against the Humane Society and have no further comment at this time."

A crisis at the Pensacola Humane Society was laid bare in mid-December when organization staff, volunteers and fosters published a letter from an entity calling itself We The Organization that admonished the board and called for the removal of Adcox as board president.

The group had bonded to "take a stand against the board for mismanagement, misappropriation and violations to bylaws," according to the letter.

"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.

Without naming Adcox, the statement claimed the Humane Society 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 blamed Adcox for failing to respond to a "financial crisis" by waiting 22 days to hold an emergency board meeting to address allegations the Humane Society would not meet payroll and owing more than \$50,000 in back owed invoices, which it claims left the agency's bank account \$11,000 overdrawn.

Adcox and the rest of the board continue to deny any misappropriation of funds, though at a meeting with board members after the release of the letter the staff cited three specific instances in which they could not access donor money set aside in restricted accounts for specific purposes.

The board members had no answers to what had become of the restricted fund monies.

Moore-Joseph was the interim executive director at the time the We The Organization letter was sent out and when speaking to the media Adcox referred to her as a "rogue" agency leader. She contacted the Pensacola News Journal after Adcox was publicly critical of her and seemed to shrug off the allegations brought up by We The Organization.

"I refuse to give in. The only thing I have is my reputation, my morals and my integrity, and they're not getting that," she said at the time.

The News Journal also obtained audio records of the meeting that was held between seven board members and the staff, volunteers and fosters following the publication of the We The Organization letter. In the meeting board members confirmed the Humane Society has been struggling financially for some time and at one point took out a \$20,000 emergency line of credit to cover costs.

On Dec. 19, the board of directors issued a statement announcing the hiring of the Pensacola-based accounting firm of Saltmarsh Cleaveland & Gund. The firm had been instructed "to investigate and resolve financial concerns raised by We The Organization."

More: Pensacola Humane Society hires accounting firm to review 'misappropriation' allegations

The board also hired Tallahassee-based employment and labor relations attorney Linda Edwards in an effort to "open lines of communication with the group" and assigned Board

Member Eloise Lautier to serve as a liaison between the board and Humane Society staff.

On Wednesday, in the wake of Joseph-Moore's firing, Lautier sent out a memo to remaining staff members, notifying them the board "expect(s) each employee to participate in fact finding meetings with Edwards (the attorney)."

The fact finding meetings will be one on one, Lautier wrote to staff members, and Humane Society policies prohibit retaliation for participating in such meetings.

"You should feel free to discuss your concerns with her without fear of retaliation," the memo states. "Information provided to the board will not contain specific names or identifying information, however, if anyone has engaged in misconduct such issues will be handled accordingly."

"Following the fact finding, Ms. Edwards will make recommendations about how we move forward together," the memo from Lautier states.

It is not clear how many, if any, current employees will be available for fact finding meetings. Martinez said she knows of just two Humane Society staff members who plan on sticking around through the end of the year.

"We had all this in place in case this all went south, and it did," she said of the plans to clear the shelter and tender resignations. "Things have just gone from bad to worse and we're not getting any answers."