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Pensacola Humane Society shelter emptied, staff quit amid Board controversy

by: [Christopher Lugo](#)

Posted: Dec 29, 2022 / 04:01 PM CST

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PENSACOLA, Fla. (WKRG) — Pensacola Humane Society staff worked Wednesday to move all animals from the shelter, the latest development in the escalating conflict between the PHS Board of Directors and its workers that leaves the shelter empty and largely unstaffed.

A vocal group of staff, volunteers and fosters allege Board President Gerald Adcox has mismanaged money, misappropriated funds and violated bylaws. The group also accused Adcox of making misogynistic comments and sexual innuendos to co-workers.

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19 days after allegations were made, the PHS Board fired Director of Development Manda Moore-Joseph for “insubordination, failure to follow the terms of employment and engaging in activities that reflect poorly on the Pensacola Humane Society,” according to a letter sent to Moore-Joseph and shared with WKRG News 5.

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Since learning of Moore-Joseph’s termination, all department heads at PHS have resigned. All the animals were removed to other shelters in Santa Rosa and Escambia Counties. Santa Rosa County spokesperson Sarah Whitfield confirmed they have taken responsibility for 70 cats total.

WKRG News 5 has made attempts to reach out to all 12 board members for comment. The board president responded with a cease and desist letter sent to the employees, volunteers and fosters, and the board secretary responded with a blanket statement from the humane society about the board hiring two outside organizations to look into the allegations. No other board members responded for comment.

A media spokesperson for the Board, Carlton Proctor, confirmed to WKRG News 5 on Thursday that the “majority” of employees have resigned and that no animals are in the shelter.

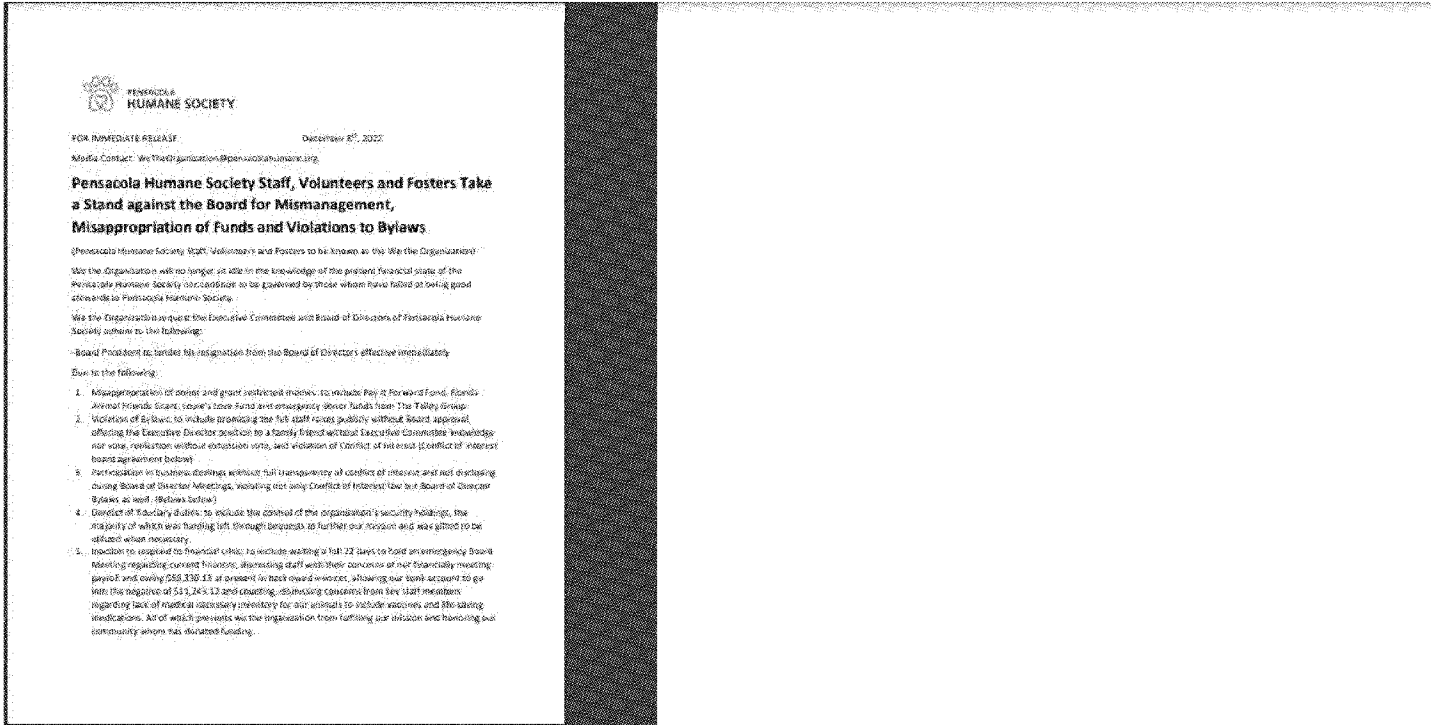
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Staff, volunteers demand change at Pensacola Humane Society



In a Dec. 8 news release, the group alleged Adcox misappropriated more than \$90,000 of donor and grant money.

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WeTheOrganizationPressRelease Download

“In past weeks, key staff members have used personal credit cards to continue assisting with programs that are funded with restricted funds such as Louie’s Love Fund, to still honor the promises made by Pensacola Humane Society to the gracious donors, family foundations and grant makers,” the organization wrote in the release.

But, said We The Organization, staff could only sacrifice so much before being forced to tell people “no.”

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“In the last few days, we the organization have had to take calls from community members needing help and having to say ‘no,’” according to the release. “We are being forced to say no despite knowing we should have the restricted funds to assist in our accounts. Staff members personally could no longer absorb the burden of the extent of misappropriation of these funds.”

We The Organization detailed how Adcox’s alleged misappropriation of funds hurt people in the community.



Fund for \$300 for her beloved dog. The second was a domestic violence victim who had finally gathered the courage to leave her abuser. She fled with her two dogs, through Louie's Love Fund we can privately board her animals so she can seek safety in a shelter and once safe and settled, be reunited with her beloved animals. Both had to be informed we did not have the funds to help. This misappropriation of restricted funds should never happen.”

We The Organization also alleges Adcox violated PHS bylaws. The group said Adcox:

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- Publicly promised staff raises without Board approval
- Offered the Executive Director position to a family friend without Executive Committee knowledge
- Was reelected without extension vote, allowing him to be board president multiple times in a row
- Violated Conflict of Interest clause by voting to add a friend to the Board
- Participated in business dealings without full transparency
- Failed to act adequately to the financial crisis

We The Organization's allegations go further than mismanagement. The group also alleges troubling behavior, including misogynistic comments, sexual innuendos and inappropriate comments to staff, volunteers and Board of Directors.

We The Organization called on the rest of the PHS Board to act. The group asked the Board to individually recommit to the Pensacola Humane Society by: volunteering monthly to work alongside staff and other volunteers, assist in fundraising, and to stop holding meetings at the Pensacola Yacht Club, which allegedly cost the Board up to \$475 per meeting.

In the release, the group said they were not displeased with all Board members.

“We the organization are not displeased with all the Board of Directors or the Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer whom sit on our Executive Committee,” according to the release. “We strongly feel an overwhelming majority of issues have not been made transparent to those Board of Directors and thus they have been left in the dark. We do however feel there has been a lack of involvement as a whole and are hopeful this protest sparks change, transparency and recommitment.”

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We The Organization wrote that they were publicly protesting under the National Labor Relations Act, the Consumer Financial Protection Act and the federal Whistleblowers protection laws.

“If we are terminated or no longer permitted to come to work, we the organization have made arrangements with both county shelters and rescue groups to transfer our animals too,” the organization wrote in the release. “We will continue to assist our community with outreach and through our programs to the best of our ability.”

The group said they had two options in the face of the alleged misconduct and financial crisis. “We the organization were faced with a choice,” the organization said in the release. “Watch our soon to be 80-year-old organization dwindle to nothing in the next six to seven months due to our financial situation, or fight for it. We chose to fight.”

Backlash from the Board

The Board called an emergency meeting once they found out about the news release. Employees said they had spoken up about financial concerns since Oct. 5. Board President Gerald Adcox was not at the Dec. 12 emergency meeting. Board member Hank Gonzales said Adcox did not attend because Adcox was the target of accusations and did not want the meeting to become contentious.

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But contentious it was.

“If this document was intended to get the board’s attention, you’ve got our attention,” Gonzales said in the meeting. “We may disagree on the method of getting our attention, but that’s OK.”

During the two-hour long meeting, board members asked several times who wrote the press release, to which the group of 40 staff members and volunteers answered in unison, “we wrote it.”

Board members said in the meeting they had no idea there were that many concerns, but they have been struggling financially for quite a while.

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“This organization has been struggling for a couple of reasons,” Gonzales said. “COVID shutdowns interfered with a lot of our fundraising activities. We haven’t been able to hire a vet who was qualified for neuter and spay that used to be a regular source of income for us.”

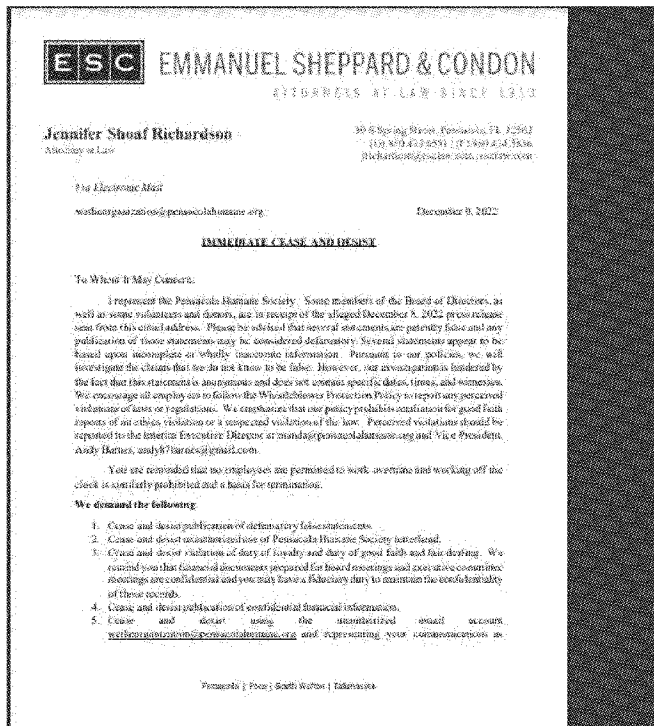
But Gonzales said the situation was not as dire as employees feared.

“We are not broke. We are very financially sound. When we were made aware that we were in a cash crunch, the board decided instead of selling securities that we have for a rainy day, we decided to secure a line of credit and use those things to satisfy the short-term needs.”

Three days before the meeting, We The Organization received a cease-and-desist letter from Jennifer Shoaf Richardson, an attorney at Emmanuel Sheppard & Coddon, who is representing the PHS Board.

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Cease-and-Desist-letter Download

“Please be advised that several statements are patently false and any publication of those statements may be considered defamatory,” the letter reads. “Several statements appear to be based upon incomplete or wholly inaccurate information. Pursuant to our policies, we will investigate the claims that we do not know to be false. However, our investigation is hindered by the fact that this statement is anonymous and

The cease and desist letter demanded the following:

- Cease and desist publication of defamatory false statements.
- Cease and desist unauthorized use of Pensacola Humane Society letterhead.
- Cease and desist violation of duty of loyalty and duty of good faith and fair dealing. We remind you that financial documents prepared for board meetings and executive committee meetings are confidential and you may have a fiduciary duty to maintain the confidentiality of those records.
- Cease and desist publication of confidential financial information.
- Cease and desist using the unauthorized email account wetheorganization@pensacolahumane.org and representing your communications as communications of the Pensacola Humane Society. This activity may be construed as violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

“While the Pensacola Humane Society would prefer to resolve this matter without resorting to formal legal proceedings, please be advised that it takes this matter extremely seriously and, if necessary, will take appropriate legal action to vindicate its rights and to protect its integrity and reputation,” the letter reads.

On Dec. 19, the Board sent a memo to all Humane Society department heads requiring them to provide a list of information “to ensure the continued safe operations of the Pensacola Humane Society and to provide the necessary oversight required to care for our animals.”

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The board wanted the following from the department heads:

- List of all vaccines, medications and supplies needed at this time.
- List of all staff who have administrator access to PHS email system.
- List of all staff and others who have administrator access to PHS Facebook page.
- List of all staff who have administrator access to PHS website.
- Name, e-mail address and phone number of PHS web master.
- List of all access codes and passwords needed to access PHS Quickbooks, PHS e-mail, PHS Facebook pages and PHS website.

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December 19, 2022

To: Aly Martinet, Jessica Fischer, Jess Gehres, Raina Townsend, Janet Beall

From: Board of Directors

Re: To ensure the continued safe operations of the Pensacola Humane Society and to provide the necessary oversight required to care for our animals

Memo

Pursuant to a meeting of the Pensacola Humane Society Board of Directors on December 19, the board of Directors advises you that you are required to provide the following information (see list below) to the Board by no later than close of business Wednesday, December 21, 2022.

Additional information and items not included here may also be required as needed.

Information and Items Required

1. List of all vaccines, medications and supplies needed at this time.
2. List of all staff who have administrator access to PHS email system.
3. List of all staff and others who have administrator access to PHS Facebook pages.
4. List of all staff who have administrator access to PHS website.
5. Name, e-mail address and phone number of PHS web master.
6. List of all access codes and passwords needed to access PHS Quickbooks, PHS e-mail, PHS Facebook pages and PHS website.

Please confirm receipt of this document. Any reply should be directed to entire PHS Board of Directors.

Thank you.

Pensacola Humane Society Board of Directors

Eloise B. Lautier, Secretary

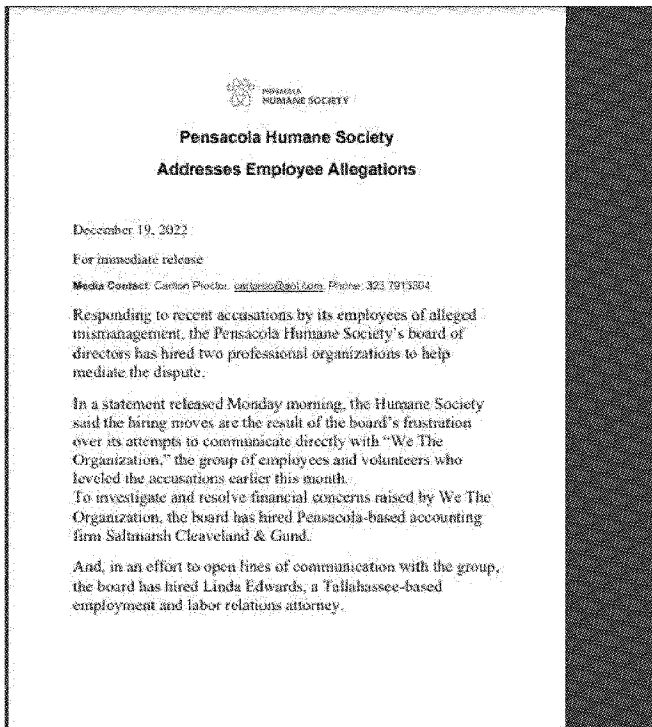
The department heads said they believed they were being set up for failure.

“We are in the midst of a busy holiday season with Jingle Paws preparation, and I also just got back from vacation, so I have some catching up to do in my own department,” one department head wrote back to the board. “I am not quite sure why I am required to provide this information to begin with. I feel as though I am being set up for failure.”

The Board then hired two organizations, one to handle the financial situation and another to mediate between the Board and employees.

In a statement from Dec. 19 given to WKRG News 5 by PHS Board Secretary Eloise Lautier, the Humane Society said the the hiring moves are the result of the Board’s frustration over its attempts to communicate directly with We The Organization.

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Carlton-press-release Download

"To investigate and resolve financial concerns raised by We The Organization, the board has hired Pensacola-based accounting firm Saltmarsh Cleaveland & Gund," the board wrote in a statement. "And, in an effort to open lines of communication with the group, the board has hired Linda Edwards, a Tallahassee-based employment and labor relations attorney."

The Board's Dec. 19 statement said Edwards was hired to, "... make every attempt to arrive at a professional and logical resolution to the concerns of We The Organization. The board firmly believes we can resolve these issues, but only if both parties are willing to communicate on a good-faith basis."

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"Furthermore, we do not believe the financial allegations this group has raised are true," according to the Dec. 19 statement. "But the only way to find out is to get We The Organization to produce the documents we've asked for and work with Saltmarsh to help us arrive at a professional and agreed-upon conclusion."

Since then, on Dec. 28, staff received an email from Lautier stating, "The Board of Directors has heard your concerns."

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December 28, 2022

Dear Employee:

With the help of employees, donors and volunteers, the Pensacola Humane Society (PHS) has existed for nearly 80 years "committed to improving the lives of companion animals in our community through advocacy, adoption, education, and sanctuary". We want to continue this mission for the next 80 years and beyond.

The Board of Directors has heard your concerns. While we may not agree with the allegations that have been made against the Board in general and against individual Board members, we have a duty to act in the best interest of the organization. To address the concerns, the Board has appointed Board member Eloise Lautier to serve as a liaison between the employees and the Board during this time.

We have engaged the CPA firm of Saltmarsh, Cleveland & Gund to review the financial records. Any person who has used personal funds for the benefit of the organization should provide receipts to the designated Board member as soon as possible. To ensure that a neutral listening ear is available to help us all better understand the challenges and concerns, the Board has retained Attorney Linda Bond Edwards from Tallahassee to listen to your concerns and allegations and make recommendations for moving forward.

Because we want to hear about your concerns, we expect each of you to participate in the fact-finding meetings with Ms. Edwards. Ms. Edwards will reach out to department heads. The fact-finding meetings will be one on one with Ms. Edwards. PHS policies prohibit retaliation for participating in such meetings so you should feel free to discuss your concerns with her without fear of retaliation.

You may contact Ms. Edwards directly at l.edwards@saltmarsh.com about scheduling a Zoom meeting with her. If you would prefer to submit your concerns in writing, you may do so by sending your concerns directly to her. 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.

We look forward to continuing our focus on our mission.

Eloise D. Lautier

PHS Board Member Liaison

"While we may not agree with the allegations that have been made against the Board in general and against individual Board members, we have a duty to act in the best interest of the organization," the email reads. "To address the concerns, the Board has appointed Board member Eloise Lautier to serve as a liaison between the employees and the Board at this time."

In the email, employees are expected to participate in fact-finding meetings, which are one-on-one with Edwards, the hired attorney. Also, the email said the Board expects employees who have used personal funds for "the benefit of the organization" should provide receipts.

Following the fact-finding meetings, the email said Edwards will make recommendations about how the Board moves forward "together."

Staff regroup after emergency Board meeting

WKRG News 5 sat down with three employees of PHS last Wednesday, Dec. 21, to talk about the ongoing situation.

Director of Animal Care Melissa Garrett said the situation has been going on for months. She said she would put in purchase orders for vaccines, medication and supplies and they would not get ordered.

"We are backed up," Garrett said. "We still have things haven't been ordered for two to three months now. I was told it was basically because we have no money."

Because of this, Garrett said she is having to shut down intakes.

"I'm having to tell these fosters, no you don't get three vaccinations for your kittens, it has to go down to two, which opens them up to disease, but we had to lower out standard of care because I'm having to hoard vaccines," Garrett said.

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“They really just wanted a scape goat,” Garrett said. “They were out for a witch hunt. So, nothing got solved. When we asked our questions, they differed. Like I said, they ended up getting their feelings hurt because we wouldn’t tell them who wrote the press release. They kept acting like the victim, when the victim is our community. The victim is our donors and our animals.”

During the meeting, Garrett said the Board told her she would be able to order vaccines and medicine. A week later, vaccines were finally ordered.

For Garrett, this fight is a last-ditch effort to save the Pensacola Humane Society.

“When we go away, there will be no one there to help the community,” Garrett said. “We do a lot for the community that people probably don’t know or understand. If we go, it’s really going to hurt our community. If they don’t plan on helping us save it, then we plan on walking out. We were hoping this would be the thing that would get them to help, but since they have lawyered up, it shows they don’t care about the animals.”

Jessica Fischer, Head of Communications and Marketing at PHS, said her handling of the Humane Society’s social media gives her insight. She sees first-hand the amount of people they have to turn away because of the lack of funding.

“We receive a lot of social media messages asking for help through rehoming or assistance with emergency vet needs,” Fischer said.

“Unfortunately, we are having to turn everyone away. We have quite a few people who are in an emergency situation with their pets, and they have nowhere to go because we have closed all of our intakes. Even the animals we have in our shelter, some of them need special food and we have halted purchasing that food.”

Fischer said she is wondering where all the money is going.

“We had just gotten a donor that donated \$5,000 for vaccines, and we don’t have vaccines. So where did that money go?” Fischer said. “And why wasn’t it spent on what it was asked to be spent on?”

The donor was Travis Talley. He emailed the Board the same day as the two-hour long meeting asking for an explanation on why the funding was not used to purchase the vaccines. In the email, he requested a full accounting of all restricted monies he donated, from the 2021 fiscal year to the present.

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“On Nov. 21, 2022, I gave an emergency donation of \$5,000 to Manda Moore-Joseph for the purchase of vaccinations and medicines for the animals in Pensacola Humane Society’s care,” Talley wrote in the email. “I would like the Board of Directors to explain why that funding was not immediately used to purchase those life-saving items. I would like to be sent receipts and invoices to verify my donation was used according to my restrictions and in a timely manner.”

When the Board sent the cease-and-desist letter, Fischer said it was heartbreaking.

“We all hoped they would be in it as much as we are, mentally, physically and emotionally, and they just aren’t there,” Fischer said. “They are more concerned with their social reputation and the way it would look on them than actually saving the organization.”

If nothing changes, Fischer said she doesn’t see PHS lasting another couple of months.

“I would really like to see our board have a heart for these animals,” Fischer said. “I would like for them to ask for our president to resign and the ones who aren’t fully in this, they need to resign, as well. That wasn’t our goal in the beginning, but at this point, it doesn’t seem like anyone cares.”

Fischer said she was one of the department heads who received the email list of demands from the board, and now, fears for her job safety.

“I feel like if I respond to their email with all of the information they are asking for, they will immediately let me go and fill my position with

A “rogue interim director,” fired and fires back

Former Director of Development, Manda Moore-Joseph, who was fired on Dec. 27, has been labeled as the “rogue interim director” by Board President Gerald Adcox in the Pensacola News Journal and Rick Outzen’s Blog.

Moore-Joseph said the board voted her to be interim executive director without her approval. As a result, Moore-Joseph said she was given access to financials, which is where she found the alleged misappropriations of funds. Moore-Joseph said she turned down the interim executive director position and retained her original title of Director of Development.

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“We were completely cash broke,” Moore-Joseph said. “It was completely shocking for me, especially being the Director of Development, that’s my reputation.”

After seeing the funds, Moore-Joseph said she immediately texted the vice president of the board, Andy Barnes, who called her back within the hour.

“I was as blunt as I could be with him, ‘We’ve broken the law. This is illegal and we have to correct this. We are going to have to talk to our donors, talk to the state and talk to the county.’” Moore-Joseph said. “He had the reaction that any normal person would have and said we had to correct this. He told me he talked with all of the other board members within the hour.”

Moore-Joseph said she then received a text from the president of the board chastising her.

“This is red alert this is literally an emergency, we have broken the law, we have to correct this right now,” Moore-Joseph said. “Our entire reputation as an organization depends on donors knowing they can trust us.”

After that interaction, Moore-Joseph said everything started going downhill.

“In every meeting that I was in after that I continued to speak up,” Moore-Joseph said. “I explained restricted versus unrestricted, I explained solicited versus unsolicited. I explained how grants work again. The message I continued to get was, ‘No we are going to make an accounting note.’ How many times do I have to continue to report it and be shushed and silenced and asked to ‘fall in line’ to commit more crimes? I reported this to the board six times.”

Before the meeting and dissemination of the press release, Moore-Joseph said she thought there would be some board members who would stand up and band together and fix the problem.

“As a board, they could have fixed this privately, but obviously, that was never going to happen,” Moore-Joseph said. “That was the choice we had to make as a staff, how many chances were we going to give. It was a Hail Mary.”

When it comes to the fight itself, Moore-Joseph said the entire staff, volunteers and fosters were ready to put it all on the line.

“We have staff members that are paycheck to paycheck. We have staff members that are food insecure,” Moore-Joseph said. “They’re willing to throw it all away and maybe struggle horribly financially to try to save this organization and that should speak clearly to that board, but it didn’t.”

If the entire board stepped down, Moore-Joseph said they could turn the organization around.

“If they would all resign and give the humane society back to the community, I have donors that want to be on this board, I have volunteers that want to be on this board. I know enough people in this town that I could build a board in two weeks, and we could probably save it,” Moore-Joseph said. “If a donor came to me today and asked if they could donate, I would have to tell them to wait, because I can’t guarantee that their money is going to go where it is because I don’t have control in that.”

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“Apparently, I was terminated last night, but as most things go with this board, communication is not their forte and no one bothered informing me,” Moore-Joseph said. “My initial reaction was I was not surprised in the least.”



December 27, 2022

Dear Ms. Moore-Joseph:

The Pensacola Humane Society Board of Directors hereby notifies you that your employment with this organization is terminated effective immediately. This action is the result of the following:

- 1) Insubordination.
- 2) Failure to follow the terms of your employment as set forth in various Employment Policies and Procedures and/or the Landrum HR Employee Handbook.
- 3) Engaging in activities that reflect poorly on the Pensacola Humane Society, both verbally and in social media, which negatively impacts the organization's mission.

You are instructed to cease the use of all social media platforms related to the Pensacola Humane Society. In addition, you are to immediately cease the use of any Pensacola Humane Society credit cards in your possession. All of the following are to be immediately turned over to Alan Harbin at Landrum Employment Services:

- Pensacola Humane Society electronic hardware, such as company laptop.
- Any access keys to Pensacola Humane Society facilities.
- Keys to all Pensacola Humane Society vehicles in your possession.
- Any/all lists in your possession, including, but not limited to, employee records, donor records, and volunteer records, either written or in electronic form.
- Any Pensacola Humane Society credit cards in your possession.

Any questions you may have should be directed to Alan Harbin at Landrum Employment Services.

Signed,

Pensacola Humane Society Board of Directors

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What the PHS board is showing to the public, according to Moore-Joseph, is not what is happening internally.

“Gerald Adcox has personally emailed staff members my salary. He implied that they had no idea where my bonus pay came from and it’s in the board minutes, they approved it,” Moore-Joseph said. “They are retaliating against staff members. I think that they are bullies, and I don’t think that the care of the animals is their first priority because they still do not have what we need to help our animals.”

WKRG News 5 reached out to the county, which said they are waiting for the Humane Society’s internal forensic audit to be completed before they decide if they are going to intervene. Moore-Joseph said a complaint was filed with the State Attorney’s Office and they have not responded yet for comment.

