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Concerns Dog Humane Society



By Jeremy Morrison

Something is going on with the Pensacola Humane Society. Or, perhaps more accurately, there's not much going on at all. Over the holidays, many of the organization's staff and volunteers walked away, and its animals have been transferred to other agencies.

Officially, its board of directors isn't saying too much.

"My heart is broken," board member Eloise Lautier reflected in an email. "That's all I can say."

However, the folks who just walked off their jobs—the department heads, volunteers and veterinary techs—they've been saying plenty. Beginning in early December with an open letter to the board, the

group unpacked accusations of financial mismanagement and poor stewardship onto the public stage.

Then, days after Christmas, the board's termination of the humane society's former interim director triggered a mass exodus from the organization.

"It's pretty obvious they're not going to be transparent, and they're not wanting to work with us, so we resigned," explained Melissa Garrett, a day after leaving her post as director of animal health.

So what exactly is going on with the Pensacola Humane Society? Manda Moore-Joseph, the former interim executive director who was laid off two days after Christmas, thinks she has a pretty good idea.

"They didn't take this seriously the way they should have, and they got offended by it and played the victim," she said. "The donors are the victims. The state, the county, they're victims. But the real victims are the community and the animals that we can't help now."

Into the Light

The Pensacola Humane Society's meltdown has been unfolding publicly since early December, when a collective of staff and volunteers, under the banner of WeTheOrganization, laid out concerns in a letter to the board. But, really, it goes back a bit further to earlier this year when Moore-Joseph began to realize something was amiss.

"It was insane," the former interim executive director recalled.

Moore-Joseph had discovered the humane society was teetering on the edge of a fiscal cliff. There was no money to purchase vaccines for the animals, or specialty food, or fund rehoming efforts. In fact, she estimated, the organization only had about six or seven months of funding left.

"I mean, we're begging the community for stuff nonstop right now," Moore-Joseph said. "Our programs have stopped because there's no money in them because that was misappropriated."

The misappropriation of funds accusation is at the heart of the Dec. 8 letter that outlined a list of concerns. Specifically, the letter states that donor and grant-restricted funds have been funneled into the general operating budget, with those funding sources including the Pay It Forward Fund, Florida Animal Friends Grant, Louie's Love Fund, as well as emergency donor funds from The Talley Group.

According to Moore-Joseph, once she became aware of the organization's financial situation, she and her department heads began bringing their concerns to the board of directors.

"We kept trying," Moore-Joseph said. "I kept telling them, 'Hey, the staff is really angry. The staff is really upset. Hey, we don't have what we need. They don't have this stuff to complete their task. We don't have the supplies. The program has no money in it because it's gone.'"

Ultimately, the former interim director said she and other staff members felt they had no choice but to push the issue into public view.

"It was either A) you sit back and watch it start to fall apart, and we all start applying for jobs elsewhere, and we all abandon ship, too, or B) we all love this organization so much—do you want to fight for it?" Moore-Joseph explained. "And if you fight for it, do you do it in the dark and try to keep it in-house, which we've been trying, or do we do it in the light and pray that because there's a spotlight on it, the board's going to do the right thing? And everybody agreed that the dark wasn't working."

Attorneys & Accountants

The Pensacola Humane Society's board of directors has taken several

actions following WeTheOrganization's open letter and following a meeting during which the concerns outlined in the letter were discussed.

"Their first step was a cease and desist," quipped Moore-Joseph.

True, the board did lawyer-up, bringing on attorney Jennifer Shoaf Richardson from local firm Emmanuel Sheppard & Condon, as well as an employee-relations attorney from Tallahassee. But they also hired accounting firm Saltmarsh, Cleaveland & Gund to dig into the organization's finances and determine if funds have been misappropriated.

Moore-Joseph thinks Saltmarsh's forensic accounting could prove interesting.

"I think it's going to show that they depleted all their cash, which means all your restricted funds were spent," she said. "I know, at least, of \$93,000 that should have still been sitting there that was restricted."

Beyond bringing on attorneys and accountants, PHS's board of directors has also brought aboard spokesperson Carlton Proctor to field inquiries. Gerald Adcox, the board president, has penned an editorial in the daily paper defending the organization against "these unsubstantiated allegations."

About a week before Christmas, Adcox said he was ready to speak with Inweekly regarding the issues facing PHS. Before the interview, however, the board director said that his personal counsel had advised against it due to "several lawsuits which are sure to come soon."

Adcox is, in fact, one of the prime targets of WeTheOrganization, with one of the demands in the group's open letter being that the board president resign. Although considering the path the board has chosen

to take, Moore-Joseph thinks the entire board of directors should walk away.

"I think the whole board should just resign, and I think you should give it back to the community," she said prior to being terminated. "I have three or four donors that would love to be on that board, and there are volunteers that would love to be on that board. There are people that would love to see it saved and have the funds to come forward and help with that, but they're not going to do it with that board."

The Big Walk-Away

Before walking off their jobs, workers with the Pensacola Humane Society transferred the animals in its care to other facilities in the area. Dogs went to the Escambia County Animal Shelter and cats to the Santa Rosa County Animal Services.

This was always the plan, explained Garrett, the former director of animal health. Making sure the animals would be in good hands was a top priority.

"We didn't want our animals to be left there without knowing if anybody was there to take care of them," she said. "We just decided early on that if we did this, we would get them all out."

Garrett really liked her job with the humane society. She liked the work and her co-workers and volunteers.

"I'm gonna miss all that, and that's heartbreaking," she said after leaving her job in protest.

At the same time, she's hopeful that the mass resignations at the humane society will lead to change. "Maybe they'll finally listen."

That hope, however, is tempered with measured expectations. Like Moore-Joseph, Garrett isn't sure what the path forward looks like under

the current leadership.

“At this point, I don’t think there’s a good one on the board,” she said.

“I’d like to see this organization continue, but I really don’t see it happening, not with this board.”

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