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NONPROFITS

Pensacola Humane Society has been closed 'until further notice'



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With the majority of its staff walking off the job after accusing its board of directors of mismanagement of money, the Pensacola Humane Society has closed its doors for the foreseeable future.

A notice posted this week on the agency's Facebook page apologized to its patrons for any inconvenience caused and said the Humane Society would remain closed "until further notice."

Agency staff had worked through the day Dec. 28 to move what animals remained at the Humane Society to the Escambia County Animal Shelter and Santa Rosa County Animal Services – county-run agencies that had agreed to take them in.

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Department heads and volunteers made the decision to resign from the Humane Society following the termination of Manda Moore-Joseph, the agency's director of development who had been vocal in criticizing the Humane Society's board of directors and its president, Gerald Adcox.

Moore-Joseph, who had resigned as interim executive director shortly before her firing but remained employed as director of development, was on vacation through the end of the year when she learned of the board's decision.

A group calling itself We The Organization circulated publicly a letter in December openly admonishing the board and calling for Adcox to be ousted as board president. Asked specifically by board members in a group meeting for the names of those who had sent out the letter, staff, volunteers and fosters answered as one "we did."

We The Organization said it had opted to stand as one 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.

More: PAWS animal shelter settles lawsuit with former employee; settlement confidential

At the meeting held between board members and staff, volunteers and animal fosters after the letter was issued, board members adamantly argued that the board of directors had not misappropriated funds, but did not directly address staff allegations that thousands of dollars had gone missing from restricted agency accounts and weren't available when efforts were made to access funds for things like feral cat programs or emergency vaccines.

Taking money from nonprofit accounts set aside for specific spending is illegal, Moore-Joseph said. And the board was doing just that in an effort to cover capital expenses during a time of need, she alleged.

"We were in a financial crisis, if you will, and they (the board) were spending restricted funds like they didn't understand it's illegal, especially if you can't replace it," Moore-Joseph said. "That was their fiduciary duty and they failed miserably because they weren't paying attention. It's ridiculous."

If she sues the Humane Society Board of Directors, as she said she planned to do, it would not be the first time Moore-Joseph has taken on an animal welfare agency claiming it was misspending money.

Moore-Joseph worked in Okaloosa County as community development director for the Panhandle Animal Welfare Service, or PAWS, until she was terminated in September of 2019. She was fired, according to a lawsuit she filed in 2020, for coming forward in a whistleblower capacity to speak out against fiscal mismanagement.

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

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

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The lawsuit also claimed members of the PAWS governing board turned hostile toward Moore-Joseph 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."

Thompson resigned abruptly in February of 2020, citing personal reasons. Tracey Williams, who succeeded her as executive director, promised to drastically change the way PAWS conducts business. The agency serves both animal control and animal shelter functions for Okaloosa County.

Moore-Joseph and PAWS entered into mediation in February of 2021 and the lawsuit was resolved on Feb. 9. The Okaloosa Clerk of Court's Office records show Moore-Joseph voluntarily dismissed her claim with prejudice, meaning she had agreed not to seek further action.

Terms of the settlement remain confidential. When contacted Wednesday, Moore-Joseph said she signed a nondisclosure agreement and added "I was transparent with both employers moving forward in my career."

Pensacola Humane Society Board members contacted for this story did not return requests for comment.