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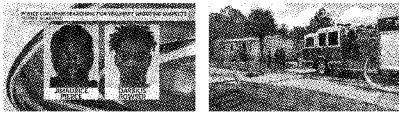
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ESCAMBIA COUNTY

Pensacola Humane Society 'lets the hammer fall,' closes shelter, is without department heads

by: Christopher Lugo
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PENSACOLA, Fla. (WKRG) — Now without staff and without animals, the Pensacola Humane Society announced on its Facebook page it is closed “until further notice.”

WKRG News 5 spoke with the PHS board’s attorney Michael Kelly, who said, “The decision to close the shelter was neither granted by the board, nor was the board notified prior to the staff’s unilateral decision to do so. We are looking into it further and have no additional comment at this point.”

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On Thursday, Dec. 28, PHS board spokesperson Carlton Proctor confirmed to WKRG News 5, a “majority” of its staff had resigned and moved all of the animals to either Escambia County or Santa Rosa County shelters.

19 days after allegations were made by an organization called “We the Organization,” comprised of staff, volunteers and fosters, 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.

In a press release sent out Dec. 8, the group called for the removal of board president Gerald Adcox. The group alleged Adcox misappropriated more than \$90,000 of donor and grant money.

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“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.

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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.

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.

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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Since then, on Dec. 28, staff received an email from Lautier stating, “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,” 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.”

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Over the weekend, staff members allege board members are now blocking active volunteers from the private Facebook group for volunteers.

The PHS board recently fired their volunteer coordinator, Rae Townsend, while she was on break for the New Year’s Holiday. She told WKRG News 5 on Thursday she believes she was terminated wrongfully.

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Some of the reasons Townsend said she was terminated for were insubordination and acting outside the scope of her customary job duties without prior approval.

“Basically, we have a volunteer Facebook page and I’m an admin on there,” Townsend said. “A couple of our other coworkers were admins, as well. I hadn’t resigned yet, but they blocked me from the page. I sent them an email asking them why and what was the meaning of it and one of the board members replied in the email thread, not realizing she was replying to me, saying, ‘What do I tell her.’ They ended up emailing me back saying they had revoked everyone’s admin access for the time being.”

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Townsend said she then started getting emails and texts from the volunteers who were still planning on going to the shelter to take care of the feral cat community.

“These people were the volunteers that use the Facebook page the most and they were all getting blocked off of it, as well,” Townsend said. “Then, I emailed the board again.”



guys messing with the volunteer program????? You guys are only reinforcing their major upset towards you guys. In case you didn't realize, PHS is their passion, their lives. And you guys have been destroying that day by day for them."

Since Townsend wasn't getting any answers, she said she mentioned to the board she was going to make a new Facebook page for the volunteers. She said once she sent that email, things went downhill.

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"One of the board members emailed me back and told me to be advised that you are not supposed to make your own Facebook page utilizing Pensacola Humane Society's name, logo and likeness, in any form that would make people believe that I am representing PHS in any form or manner," Townsend said. "After I said that, I did not go against what they said. Then one of the board members emailed the email thread again, not realizing I'm on there and said, 'I like the way this is worded, if she violates this after receiving it, then let the hammer fall.'"

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The next day, Townsend said she received a termination letter.

"I know this is a really tough time for everybody," Townsend said. "Our volunteers have poured their entire heart and soul into this organization."

During the mass exodus of employees on Dec. 28, Townsend said she decided to stay, to help the volunteers who had questions, but expected her termination.

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"When they removed my admin access from the volunteer Facebook page, I had to let them know that I hadn't resigned yet," Townsend said. "It really didn't seem to matter to them. I haven't been treated right by the board. I kind of knew I was in for some trouble staying on the team. It felt really 'icky' still working for them, but I knew it was temporary. I knew they were against me. I kind of felt like they were bullying me anyway to get me to quit."



don't know. I hope that the pieces can be picked up and we can maybe put the organization back together, but I don't see that happening unless we get a whole new board."

Linda Signer has been a volunteer with PHS since she moved to Pensacola from Kansas. She told WKRG News 5 the recent developments have left her very disappointed. For the past two years, Signer was heavily involved in the trap, neuter, release program at PHS.

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"We have helped hundreds of animals getting them fixed and helping the community," Signer said. "To see all of that go away because of what's happening is really sad. It's a sad thing for the community."

Signer gave examples of missing money, saying sometimes they would get donations of \$100 specifically for the feral cat community and then the money would be gone.

"Most of the owners were so appreciative they would give us checks for the TNR program," Signer said. "Most recently, we got a check for \$100 turned it in, then a week later we would try to order supplies for the cats and the money wasn't there. How is this possible to happen? I do not understand."

If the board was noticing that they were having financial problems, Signer said the staff and volunteers would have rallied together to help.

"Nothing was said," Signer said. "Even when we have the meeting with the board, they told us we didn't need to worry about the money. Supposedly there was money in assets, but they had to go out and borrow \$20,000. Why? If you have all this money, you're a non-profit organization. How is it that you have to go borrow money and how far is \$20,000 going to last? Even that meeting became very confrontational."

When she first thought about volunteering for PHS, Signer said she thought it was a top-notch organization.

"When I moved here from Kansas in 2018, I wasn't sure I wanted to do volunteer stuff for the humane society, but I didn't know where to go," Signer said. "My veterinarian told me to go to Pensacola Humane Society. It was clean, everybody was so happy to be there, and they were so cordial. It gradually went downhill. Of course, we had COVID, but you can't blame everything on COVID."

Signer said she would like to see somebody take over the humane society so they can get back on the right track.

"Another group of board members maybe," Signer said. "I feel like it is an asset to the community, but as it is right now, I don't think it will happen. I feel that if we had a new board that would really get involved and take an interest and reestablish it, then you would see a lot of volunteers and staff come back again. They just wanted somebody to acknowledge that monies are not being handled properly and how can we fix it to move forward. None of that happened."