

County shelter mistakenly kills two pit bulls, violating new euthanasia policies

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Staff at Lane County Animal Services violated new shelter policies in killing two dogs earlier this month that the county had mistakenly identified as unadoptable, a county official said Monday.

The incident has outraged animal advocates and frustrated the shelter's new animal-behavior coordinator, who resigned in response. The killings and the backlash in the shelter community are a setback for an agency that just adopted sweeping changes in response to constant public pressure to save and adopt out more dogs and cats.

Tom Howard, the agency's supervisor, authorized on Sept. 12 the killing of two male pit bulls — a brindle named Harrison and a red-and-white named Crimson — that should not have been destroyed, said Karen Gaffney, assistant director of Health and Human Services, which oversees the agency.

The dogs were killed after staff miscommunication, misidentification of dogs and violation of the agency's new, month-old euthanasia policy, Gaffney said.

The day before the killings, Howard and Laurie Adomite, the shelter's behavior and training coordinator, had discussed dogs that volunteers had found to be aggressive.

Howard thought Adomite agreed with the decision to put down the dogs in question but learned after the fact that she did not. The two were apparently talking about different dogs in at least one case, Gaffney said.

The failure to provide written documentation of medical or behavioral reasons to kill the dogs and the absence of signatures from three staff members approving the decisions are violations of the new policy, Gaffney said. "The bottom line is, if it had been done in writing, this would have been avoided," Gaffney said.

The shelter is closed Mondays and Howard could not be reached for comment. Citing confidentiality of personnel matters, Gaffney would not discuss whether he or other staff members are being disciplined.

Adomite resigned over the incident, saying in a letter to the county board of commissioners that she was devastated by what she called the "very disturbing" killings. One of the dogs was highly adoptable and was to be visited by interested clients later that day, said Adomite, who had not evaluated the other dog. Adomite said staff acted unethically by reporting that she had endorsed the deaths as appropriate given the animals' behavior, which she said Monday she had not done.

Adomite worked at the shelter for about a month after volunteering there for a longer period. In her letter, she said she was worried about numerous issues, including kennel operation, safety risks, lack of accountability, poor customer service, low adoption rates and "strong concern that my feedback would be used to do nothing more than support killing."

The shelter is challenged by limited space, the crushing number of incoming animals and vocal advocates who want euthanasia used only as a last resort. Debate continues about whether the agency uses progressive methods to adopt out animals or remains mired in a “catch-and-kill” mentality.

In 2003-04, the shelter impounded 1,694 dogs and killed 149 of them due to lack of space. Some 431 cats were taken in, and none were killed due to lack of space.

By 2007-08, the shelter’s kill rates for dogs had improved considerably: The shelter received 1,825 dogs and killed 11 due to lack of space; one cat was killed due to lack of space, the shelter reported.

County officials tout the shelter’s kill rates as comparatively low. But animal advocates have questioned the numbers, saying staff members have incorrectly categorized animals and that the shelter holds animals for long, damaging periods when staff should work harder to quickly place them in new homes.

The agency’s Web site — www.lanecounty.org/Animals/ — on Monday listed 61 dogs and 93 cats in the west Eugene facility, many of them available for adoption. Of the 61 dogs, 20 were pit bulls or of a mix that includes pit bull.

Animal advocate Tamara Barnes said she hopes Gaffney will improve staff accountability and the rapport with people who want to adopt.

“If you’re not going to have staff that is going to help people who want to adopt, I don’t know what we can do there,” she said. “It’s a big problem.”

Barnes and Adomite also renewed calls for a “no-kill” supervisor who would enforce a top-to-bottom philosophical change toward saving more animals.

County commissioners have said they agree with the concept but that it could be difficult in practice, given the sheer number of animals that the shelter receives.