

August 14, 2009

Dear Members of the King County Council:

I am begging for your help. I am an officer at King County Animal Care and Control, and I cannot bear to watch the horrible suffering that is going on there any longer. I believe the conditions that I am witnessing are violations of neglect and cruelty laws, and constitute an abuse of authority, and a gross waste of taxpayer money.

Like many others, I am terrified by the proposal made this week by King County Executive Kurt Triplett to cut the animal care and control budget entirely. Things are already so bad, could he actually be thinking of making them worse? His plan would mean animals abandoned and starving on the streets all over the county and vicious packs of dogs running loose to terrorize neighborhoods. If a non-profit organization is willing to take over and do a better job than the county, that would be wonderful, but there is still going to have to have funding. Now, the county pays a lot of unnecessary money for middle and upper management that doesn't do very much, while there aren't nearly enough people to actually provide services. I guess a lot of new money got pumped into KCACC last year, but it went to all the wrong places—like more management that didn't do anything to help, and more holding capacity for animals without more people to care for those extra animals. We need a redirection of money to better leadership, hard-working managers and more animal care staff. We need to change the whole culture. We need to use our money *better*, and involve more community partners and more volunteers in helping us to care for the animals.

Conditions at the shelter are inhumane, and should not be allowed to continue any longer. The animals are suffering and dying, and there is nothing that the officers there can do about it except do our best to help them, and then watch helplessly. Night after night, I go home and cry and pray for these animals. Some of the officers complain to our supervisors and interim shelter manager Nancy McKenney, but the managers refuse to take any action, or they think there is nothing they can do. One officer broke into tears the other day because things were so bad for the animals, and was told that she had “compassion fatigue” and should get counseling, as if the suffering that we see every day is really just our problem. Most of these animals can be saved and would make great pets, but we let them get so sick and stressed at the shelter that they are dying instead. The managers just tell us to do the best that we can. But the way things are right now, the best we can do isn’t good enough.

Lately we have had more than 350 cats in the shelter, with only two or three people to take care of them. Almost all of these cats are sick. More than 75 of these cats are seriously ill, and should be under the care of a veterinarian or a veterinary technician at all times. But instead they get one person assigned to care for all 75 in a single shift, meaning that each one gets only minimal care for less than 10 minutes a day. I believe that these animals rarely get medications that they need two to three times a day as they should. No matter what the checklists say, it is just impossible with the schedule we are forced to keep. As a result, these animals don’t improve, they just get sicker and sicker, and get resistant to the one antibiotic that we use for almost everything. The suffering is hard to watch. For example, I know about a tiny kitten earlier this week in the ringworm room whose mouth was literally glued shut by a combination of mucus and medication.

No one had seen this kitten for more than 24 hours by the time the officer got to her. She had been unable to nurse with her mother or drink water, so by the time the officer soaked her mouth to allow it to open, she was seriously dehydrated. I hate to think what would have happened to this kitten if that officer was trying to move too quickly to notice her condition, and I worry that this will happen again in the coming days, and the kitten will die because she can't eat or drink.

I regularly see conditions at KCACC that I believe qualify as criminal neglect. I have watched cats die in their cages because we couldn't get them vet treatment and were just told to "put them on the list" to be seen by the veterinarian the next day. Sometimes, the veterinarian is not able to get to these animals, and they continue in unbearable suffering for days at a time. For example, earlier this week, there was a 10-week old kitten who was seriously ill from upper respiratory infection and ringworm, and the officer put him on the veterinarian's list and even wrote a note that evening saying that the officer thought the kitten was dying and needed immediate attention. No matter how sick the animals are, this is all we are allowed to do to get them medical attention. The kitten was wasting away because he was unable to eat, could hardly lift his head, and shivering because his system had gone into shock. However, the veterinarian is working these two weeks with no full time veterinary technician, so she must do all her own prep work, surgery and recovery with no one to help. As a result, she apparently left that day without doing her rounds, and never saw the kitten. The following morning the kitten had still not been seen, and then that evening around 6:30 p.m., the kitten was finally seen and euthanized after more than a day of unnecessary and unthinkable suffering. He had suffered in a cage for about a month, only to be allowed to die this horrible and

unnecessary death. He was healthy when he came in the shelter, and never should have gotten that sick in the first place. He should be in a good home right now, playing with children who love him, instead of being sent out the back door of the shelter in a garbage bag.

Some of us have begged to be allowed to at least put suffering and dying animals out of their misery, and been told “no,” because there is an obsession with meeting the council’s euthanasia targets to *pretend* that we are doing a good job. I guess if these animals just die on their own, they don’t show up on our “euthanasia” statistics. That doesn’t take us any closer to saving more animals – it just puts the animals in a different column of deaths. I’ve tried to care for cats that were too sick to eat, and had not eaten for days, maybe weeks. I’ve been ordered to force feed cats whose throats were swollen shut and were unable to swallow. They can’t eat, so they just starve – and maybe get fluids if the officers have the time. I’ve seen cats that were too sick to lift their heads up, covered in their own feces and barely able to breathe, left in their cages for days to die – and been told to “put them on the list for the vet to see.” I’ve had cats with infections so bad that their eyes exploded in my hands as I was trying to treat them. I was told of a dog who was so sick that he nearly drowned under a running stream of water in his kennel – he was too weak to lift his head out of the stream of water, but nobody noticed until he was almost dead.

We’ve told our supervisors that these animals aren’t getting proper care, but somehow they don’t see the suffering that is right in front of them. Instead, if an officer complains, he or she is sent to work in an even worse area of the shelter, or moved around a lot so he or she is unable to keep track of how the same animals are doing one

day to the next. The limited time we have to care for each animal speaks for itself. We can't move any faster when the chemicals need to sit on the cages and kennels for a certain amount of time to kill germs and bacteria. When officers can't take the time to clean properly, more animals just get sick, and it takes more money and time to care for these sick animals. It is a huge waste of taxpayer money when, instead of isolating and caring for animals properly so that they don't get sick in the first place, we do a sloppy job so that all the animals get sick, and they need to stay in the shelter much longer, with more care, and expensive medications. With the horrible conditions now, you can count on pretty much every cat who comes in the shelter to break with some illness within 7-10 days, and there is no effort to keep this from happening. There pretty much isn't a single area of the shelter, including the adoption area, where we don't have sick and contagious animals.

We don't have as many dogs as we do cats, but many of the dogs in the back have been here so long that they are going cage crazy. Only the dogs in adoption get any exercise or attention, and we often have a lot of vicious dogs that we are keeping in the back without any plan for what we are going to do with them. The county is paying day after day to care for them, with no hope that they will get any better, and knowing that if they stay at the shelter they will get sick and have more behavioral problems. I never want to kill a healthy animal, but I know that it is just a matter of time before these dogs are going to be killed, because there is no chance that they are going to get better without a behaviorist or any treatment. If we are going to kill them anyway, why do we have to torture them for several weeks first? But we still haven't gotten any training or expert

help in doing temperament evaluations, so it is hard to know which dogs really have behavior problems, and which ones are just really stressed by shelter conditions.

For some reason, management won't let volunteers to walk any dogs in the stray hold area – even if they are friendly, and even if their stray hold period is technically up. Staff doesn't have the time to exercise these animals. Sometimes animals spend a long time in stray hold before we have room to move them to adoptions, and they get worse every day. It is especially bad for dogs like Snaps, the pit bull on mandatory evidence hold, who have to sit alone in their kennels for months with no exercise. Many of the officers feel sorry for these animals and try to spend time with them if they can, but we were told at a staff meeting that Snaps wasn't supposed to get anything but food and water and a clean cage, because he wasn't there for us “to make friends” with him. When he is taken out, he is usually hauled around on the end of a control stick by officers who aren't trained to properly handle dogs, or who are so afraid of dogs that they only make things worse. It isn't their fault, because they have never really had any training on how to handle dogs with problems.

No matter what you are being told, please don't believe that the conditions at KCACC have improved over the past two years. They are as bad as ever, maybe worse than ever. The managers want to show off and meet the county's euthanasia targets, but they don't have the programs in place to move the animals out of the shelter. Nobody seems to have a strategy for doing things better. The person responsible for the adoption efforts has to spend her time cleaning kennels. Almost all the animals are sick, so they can't be adopted. We don't have nearly enough volunteers, and some rescues won't even take animals from us anymore. Yes, we expanded our space with a new cat adoption

trailer, but this just means that we can house even more animals that we can't care for. We didn't get any more staff to help care for these animals when capacity expanded, so their quality of life has declined. Why is that a good use of county money? Who decided to give us more space and more cages, but not more staff?

If we are going to care for all of these animals, we need more animal care staff. We need better programs to get them out of the shelter into homes, and help from more rescue groups. We need to isolate sick animals and treat them properly, so that all the animals don't get sick, and all the animals can move through the shelter quicker. If we could just do that one thing right, it would save so much staff time and money, and eliminate so much suffering. We need more veterinarians and technicians to help sick animals. We need a behaviorist to help the dogs with temperament problems. Most of all, we need some leadership – the supervisors do very little work, and the “managers” don't seem to understand what is really going on in the shelter because they are not sharing in the grief and exhaustion of the animal care staff. If you want to save money, cut the positions of some of these managers, and use it to fund more positions for people who actually get the work done.

But instead of getting help, things just get worse and worse. When I heard that Executive Triplett plans to cut our funding, and couldn't even imagine what we would do if that happens, because things are already so bad. When people quit, those spots are not filled. We are told at staff meetings that this is because the council has imposed a hiring freeze on us. When we built the new cat trailer, we kept all the old cages, so that now we have more holding capacity, but no additional officers to care for the animals. We also lost an officer to the new “zero tolerance” licensing scheme, so that instead of caring for

animals, he now goes around the county writing up tickets for people who don't license their pets. We also lost an animal care position to off-site adoptions (not that we don't need that position!), five to manager positions, and there are several who are off on leave. Every time we sign an "enhanced services" contract for a city, we lose another officer, because that officer can no longer work in the shelter or patrol the entire county. Many of these positions are never filled. When each of these people is pulled out of the shelter to do other things, the rest of us have to try to pick up the slack. Almost every day, we have to pull officers out away from field work so that we can just get all of the animals food and water, and clean their cages. This also means that we provide hardly any animal control services for public safety and investigations. Sometimes it takes us weeks to investigate complaints of dangerous dogs, and the lead sergeant is eight months behind in reviewing dangerous dog cases that have already been investigated, and in which the investigating officer has requested an order of confinement or removal. It is only a matter of time until someone out there gets killed because we couldn't respond to a vicious dog call, or because we didn't follow up to make sure that the vicious dog was confined or removed.

Most of the officers are afraid. They are afraid of KCACC management, the people in the RALS department, and the KCACC Guild. They are afraid that Triplett or the council will shut us down and we will all lose our jobs, and that we will never find other jobs in this economy. We are told that the council is trying to cut our funding, and we feel that we have to pretend that everything is going fine to keep that from happening, or things will get even worse. But I am tired of being afraid. Someone has to stick up for the animals and tell you about what is really happening here. For a while I waited for

someone else to do it, but now I know that it has to be me, or I won't be able to live with myself any longer.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the county ombudsman and asking for protection under the county whistleblower law. However, I still don't trust that protection to be enough, because I know everyone from the Guild to the Executive will be after me as a result of this letter. The two officers that stuck to their principles and reported the cats that KCACC left to freeze outside last fall were punished by RALS leadership for speaking out. I hear one of them is going to be permanently demoted and have his pay decreased, even though he has a family to care for. But in this economy, where is he going to go? All that the people at RALS care about is that he embarrassed them because there was a newspaper story, even though his complaint meant that the animals left outside were finally given some shelter.

I not only fear for my career, but my safety. There is a very scary, violent atmosphere down here. It has become "us" against "them," and anyone who speaks out for the animals is viewed as a traitor. The Guild is supposed to stick up for us, but they won't help if we are unfairly punished for speaking out, since they are siding with management to keep KCACC in business no matter what. It seems that everybody is on the same side, including management and the Guild, but none of them are on the side of the animals, or the officers, maybe because they are not in the trenches with us anymore.

I have asked a third party to send this letter on my behalf in the hopes that I can remain anonymous. However, I am willing to talk or meet with any of you if you want to hear this from me directly, or to answer any questions that you want to send me. I want to protect myself if I can, but the animals have to come first. Somebody has to do

something, and since no one else is standing up to help these animals, I guess it has to be me. Most of us love animals and we can't stand to watch this anymore, but we feel that we can't speak out or we will be punished.

Please help us. Please help them. Please.