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ALERT TOP STORY

Allegations against Charlottesville SPCA get state attention

Alice Berry Feb 24, 2023 0



A dog sits in a cage at the Charlottesville Albemarle Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals on Thursday, Oct. 6, 2022. MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS



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Alice Berry

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Customer Services is “reviewing” the allegations of animal mistreatment at the Charlottesville Albemarle Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, according to Albemarle County Executive Jeff Richardson.

The Board of Supervisors consulted with legal counsel regarding its relationship with the CASPCA in a closed meeting at the board’s Feb. 15 meeting.

The relationship between the county and the shelter – outlined in a memorandum of understanding between the county, the city of Charlottesville and the animal shelter – has the county pay the SPCA for pound services. In fiscal year 2023, the county gave the SPCA \$699,122 for those services. Animal control officers at the Albemarle County Police Department also work with the shelter.

Assistant to the County Executive Emily Kilroy told The Daily Progress via email on Friday that the Albemarle County Police Department is “supporting VDACS’s effort.”

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Representatives from the city of Charlottesville did not respond to repeated requests for comment from The Daily Progress. Workers and volunteers at the local SPCA have estimated the city provides about \$300,000 year to the shelter.



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During open session, Richardson told county supervisors that the state Department of Agriculture had conducted an inspection of the facility.

The full report from that inspection was requested by The Daily Progress but not delivered before press time.

“We conducted an inspection last week,” Michael Wallace, a spokesman for the Department of Agriculture, confirmed to The Daily Progress on Friday.

In the meantime, the local SPCA has been conducting a review of its own. Earlier this year, the SPCA’s board of directors hired the international law firm McGuireWoods to investigate claims of animal and worker mistreatment.

Those claims have been lodged by a group of current and former SPCA employees and volunteers which calls itself CASPCA Concerns. The group has said misconduct and mismanagement at the shelter has translated into animal neglect bordering on abuse. The shelter, the group says, is overcapacity and understaffed, with animals often kept in unsafe living conditions and volunteers and employees overworked in order to keep adoption rates high and contributions rolling in.



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The group has specifically targeted the SPCA's CEO Angie Gunter and have called for her removal.

The SPCA's board has said it stands behind Gunter while the McGuireWoods investigation is ongoing.

McGuireWoods is best known for its work in product liability, class actions and mass torts, health care, technology, white-collar criminal litigation and commercial disputes.

Demonstrators at a Feb. 11 protest told The Daily Progress they doubted McGuireWoods' investigation would be meaningful.

"It's going to absolutely be biased," according to Teddi Schrock, who said she has worked with the Charlottesville SPCA since 1984, serving as a volunteer, helping with rummage sells, working with the "Pets and People" program and once sittings on its board.

"It'll be biased," said Hannah Meanor, a former animal care worker at the shelter. Meanor added that she couldn't understand why a high-powered law firm such as McGuireWoods had been hired by a local animal shelter.



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An employee at McGuireWoods referred questions about the investigation to Brian Jackson, a managing partner at the law firm's Charlottesville office who did not respond to a request for comment from The Daily Progress.

The law firm's website describes Jackson as "known for his success in trying high-exposure jury cases on behalf of energy, transportation and manufacturing companies in various jurisdictions throughout the United States."

The SPCA board's vice president, Mike Derdeyn, was an attorney at McGuireWoods' Charlottesville office from 1998 until 2003, according to his LinkedIn profile.

CASPCA Concerns has said that an investigation cannot be objective as long as Gunter remains active in her role. Current employees and volunteers, they said, would not be able to speak freely with investigators.

"Ms. Gunter's culture of fear and threats of retribution have prevented people from speaking up honestly to address the real problems for too long," according to CASPCA Concerns.



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The SPCA's board said in a Feb. 8 statement that the McGuireWoods investigation would take about 90 days.

"The Board will assess the results and recommendations of the independent review and will take appropriate actions and make appropriate policy changes that stem from it," the board said.

The shelter has been under fire since January, when CASPCA Concerns published a letter directed at the shelter's board. Photos published in the letter show dogs in pens full of urine and feces, living in crates the group said are stored in the SPCA's basement and facilities that appear to be unclean, unkempt and dangerous to the animals living there.

Since then, that letter has garnered more than 100 signatures, there have been two protests outside the SPCA's main offices on Berkmar Drive, the shelter's animal care manager has resigned and a veteran volunteer dog walker has been dismissed after raising concerns about animal safety.

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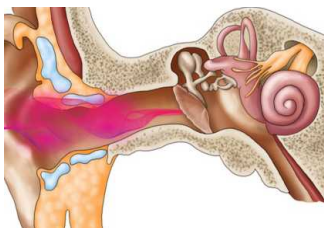
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By Alice Berry



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ALERT TOP STORY

CASPCA looking into reports of animal mistreatment, poor work conditions

Alice Berry Jan 23, 2023 1



A photo posted to Medium by CASPCA Concerns shows a dog the group says was left unattended with a mop bucket containing feces and chemical agents. CASPCA CONCERNS



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Alice Berry

The board that oversees Charlottesville's animal shelter and adoption center is looking into allegations that the organization's leader is mistreating both animals and humans.

Nearly 60 current and former employees and volunteers at the Charlottesville-Albemarle Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have signed a letter to the board detailing allegations that CEO Angie Gunter's treatment of animals was "deeply concerning" and that she created a "hostile work environment" for those who worked under her.

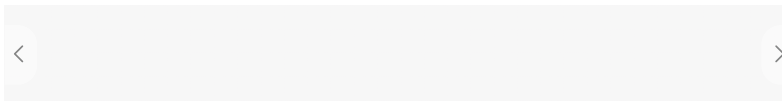
"During my career in animal welfare I have never witnessed or experienced a toxic culture and unethical practices like I witnessed at CASPCA," the shelter's former Director of Operations Taylor Lefebvre wrote in the letter.

Lefebvre's group, which is calling itself CASPCA Concerns, declined to make a comment directly to The Daily Progress and instead directed the newspaper to its letter and a post on Medium.

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Gunter referred a request for comment to the local SPCA's board of directors.



"The Board intends to pursue diligently the goals of making the shelter a better place for both the animals and the hard-working employees and volunteers on whom they rely," the board said in a statement.

The board said that it would be working with Gunter to address concerns and that it believed Gunter is still "the best person to lead this effort forward."

"We ask for your patience as this process moves forward."

The statement did not directly address comments or photos posted by the group of current and former staff on Medium.

One photo online shows puppies and one adult dog standing on top of a sheet that appears soaked with urine and feces, which the CASPCA Concerns group said shows the dogs in the facility's basement training room. According to the group, the animals had tested positive for canine distemper, a contagious disease that attacks a dog's respiratory, gastrointestinal and nervous systems. It is usually fatal.

Another photo in the post shows a pool of urine and feces on the floor of the same room, along with multiple dog crates. One dog sits on top of a box that CASPCA Concerns said contains bleach. CASPCA Concerns wrote that while it's typical for a shelter to adapt extra spaces in emergency situations, the practice has become routine at the Charlottesville-Albemarle shelter.

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The group said that Gunter's desire to maintain a high adoption and live release rate means that animals with behavioral or health issues get adopted out to inexperienced adopters or suffer in the shelter.

The SPCA announced earlier this month it had achieved a record number of adoptions in 2022.

Adoptions were arranged for 3,803 pets last year, the highest number in the organization's history, according to a Jan. 12 post on the group's Facebook page. The same post said that it achieved new highs in both its canine and feline live release rates, at 99% and 98% last year, respectively.

"Dogs are being warehoused with no resources and no behavior modification plans, while they continue to bite each other and humans," Lefebvre said in the letter.

Katie Roche, a former adoption coordinator at the shelter, cited a dog named Jenny who could barely walk as an example.

Jenny "would lay in her own urine for hours each day because she was unable to properly urinate. Veterinary staff recommended euthanasia but Angie dismissed their recommendations. We had to watch Jenny suffer for months before Angie finally conceded," Roche said in the letter.

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"On several occasions, [Gunter] asked me for my personal opinions about other staff members, and aggressively countered anything positive I had to say about them," former adoption counselor and rescue manager Tori Cunningham wrote.

"I left the Shelter in tears because Angie was upset with me because I didn't share office gossip with her," Tomeka Rhoades, a former administrative assistant at the shelter, wrote.

Multiple employees said that Gunter yelled at them in front of other employees or visitors at the shelter.

The original letter's signatories said the board has been unresponsive to their complaints, though the board has since said it is looking into the allegations.

CASCPA Concerns has urged the community to continue supporting the shelter's employees and volunteers by adopting and fostering.

"Don't let Angie Gunter and the Board just count your caring act towards their precious numbers. Tell them you foster and adopt despite their leadership. Tell them you foster and adopt because you want to save animals from their cruelty," the group said in a statement.



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ALERT TOP STORY

CASPCA

Embattled Charlottesville SPCA to replace director

FROM STAFF REPORTS May 20, 2023 0



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Week In Review



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at

Sue Friedman, who most recently served as executive director of the Jefferson School Foundation and served for years as the leader of the Alzheimer's Association of Central and Western Virginia, is set to take the top job at the Charlottesville Albemarle Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

She will be replacing sitting Executive Director Angie Gunter on May 24.



Friedman
RYAN M. KELLY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“We are excited to welcome Sue Friedman as our Interim Executive Director,” the local SPCA’s board president, Jenn Corbey, said in a Friday statement announcing the leadership change.

Gunter had served as director of the local animal shelter since 2017.

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In the final months of that yearslong tenure, however, she faced mounting allegations of mistreating both people and animals at the SPCA.



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LOCAL NEWS
Embattled Charlottesville SPCA puts CEO on administrative leave
Reynolds Hutchins

The decision to place Gunter on leave, the board said in April, was made after the conclusion of an independent review conducted by international law firm McGuireWoods at the board’s behest after allegations first started to mount earlier this year.

“The review included recommendations for changes designed to improve our workplace culture and the quality of care for the animals entrusted to us,” the board said in a statement at the time. “Based on the results of the review, we are developing a specific plan with concrete steps to effect operational changes across several

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al

The decision to hire McGuireWoods in the first place was prompted by a flurry of allegations from current and former employees and volunteers at the SPCA.



CHARLOTTESVILLE NEWS
Protesters call for CASPCA director's resignation
Alice Berry

At the start of the year, a group calling itself CASPCA Concerns sent a letter to the SPCA board, which has since garnered more than 100 signatures, detailing what signatories described as misconduct and mismanagement at the shelter that has translated into animal neglect bordering on abuse. The shelter, the group said, is overcapacity and understaffed, with animals often kept in unsafe living conditions and their carers overworked in order to keep adoption rates high and contributions rolling in.



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The letter called out Gunter by name and included photos of dogs in pens full of urine and feces, animals living in crates the group said are stored in the shelter's basement and facilities that appear to be unclean, unkempt and dangerous to the animals living there.

In February, after the SPCA's board hired McGuireWoods to conduct its review, a Virginia Department of Agriculture inspection found repeat violations of state law at the animal shelter.

The report mentioned no evidence of animal abuse, neglect or other mistreatment. However, it did highlight multiple instances in which several documents at the shelter were missing information required by law.



LOCAL NEWS
State cites Charlottesville SPCA for repeat violations
Reynolds Hutchins

March saw multiple volunteers either resign or asked to leave. And in one instance, the SPCA employed a Richmond-based law firm to dismiss a volunteer dog walker, a decision it said was necessary "given the current climate and level of scrutiny at CASPCA."

Throughout all of this, the SPCA's higher-ups said they stood behind the shelter's CEO.



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LOCAL NEWS
Charlottesville SPCA demands protesters delete allegations
Alice Berry

The CASPCA Concerns group has applauded the shelter's decision to remove Gunter, while noting that Gunter was only part of the problem.

"While we are glad that the board has taken action," the group said in an email to The Daily Progress in April, "it is crucial that the SPCA continues to prioritize the safety and well-being of the animals in their care, and we hope that the temporary replacement will be someone who is able to do so effectively."

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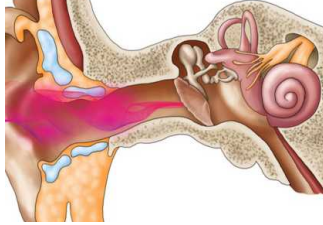
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"When those volunteers enter the building, we are reminded of all the things they've said and done, and it brings back all the fresh trauma."



Charlottesville SPCA brings on more top brass

The addition comes roughly a month after the Charlottesville Albemarle SPCA brought on a new interim executive director.

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