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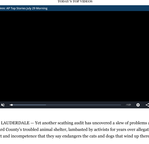
# Animals left in the dark for hours — that's just one of the problems at Broward's animal shelter.

By SUSANNAH BRYAN
SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | JAN 22, 2021 AT 5:00 AM

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FORT LAUDERDALE — Yet another scathing audit has uncovered a slew of problems at Broward County's troubled animal shelter, lambasted by activists for years over allegations of neglect and incompetence that they say endangers the cats and dogs that wind up there.

The 208-page audit makes 135 recommendations and exposes a long list of woes ranging from keeping animals in the dark too long to an ineffective pet licensing program that's costing the county $13 million a year in lost revenue.

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Bela Cards: Female cats are back at a dog as she exists the kennels with her sister Selma. Or, and her Dad Gavin Gold at the Broward County Animal Care and Adoption in Fort Lauderdale. Wednesday, January 20, 2021. Gavin Gold is a Broward County animal care and adoption supervisor who has taken care of problems at the county's six animal shelters. (whispered by Jackson Gold) (Photo by Jim Rassol for Sun Sentinel)
(Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The audit's findings echo arguments of shelter critics and Broward Commissioner Mark Bogen, who pushed for the audit a year ago after a surprise inspection by an out-of-state expert turned up dirty cages, lax kennels and other problems.

"The audit just confirmed many of the things the expert I brought in told me," Bogen said this week. "We will not stop (working on fixing the problems) until this gets resolved."

In the meantime, it's the animals that suffer, said animal advocate Michele Lazarow, a Hollandale Beach commissioner and longtime critic of the shelter.

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"This is not news to those of us who have been saying this for years," Lazarow said. "What are they going to do now after all this above has gone on for all these years? How are they going to make it up to all those animals?"

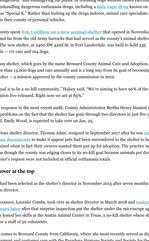
RELATED: County animal shelter fifths and hot, moves days after surprise inspection »

Some of the problems have already been fixed — though not all, said Jeff Boman, the manager with the county who has been overseeing the shelter as acting director since mid-October.

"When the auditor is auditing, the organization will start correcting issues that are found," Haley said. "People aren't sitting around waiting to do stuff. Where they can, they're fixing the problem."

Haley listed the fixes that have been put in place: Locks have been put on cages. Timers have been put on light switches so animals won't be kept in the dark for hours. Staff now works a six-hour, four-day week so they can come in earlier to clean. By the time visitors arrive, floors are dry. All larger kennels now have beds, through kennels for smaller dogs do not. Work is underway to create a portal between cat cages to allow one cat to move between two cages when there is space.

In addition, repairs have been made to the pressure-cleaning system, Haley said. And work is underway to solve the ventilation problems.


A young family checks out the dogs at the Broward County Animal Care and Adoption in Ft. Lauderdale Florida on Wednesday, January 20, 2021. Gavin Gold is a Broward County animal care and adoption supervisor who has taken care of problems at the county's six animal shelters. (whispered by Jackson Gold) (Photo by Jim Rassol for Sun Sentinel)
(Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Roughly half of the 135 recommendations have already been put into place, Haley said.

"It's 135 things," he said. "We may not agree with all of them. But you ain't going to do them all at once."

Wendy Schrager-Martin, a former shelter volunteer from Hollywood, read every single word of the audit and says she was shocked by some of it.

"It's the same things we've been saying for three years about the problems at the shelter," she said. "The lack of staff, the lack of care."

Schrager-Martin said she spoke up about the need for more shelter staff at a county commission meeting in September 2018.

"At the time there were pen dogs in the building and they had to kennel staff," she said. "There was a reason the shelter was dirty and the animals were going crazy."

Four months later, Schrager-Martin said, shelter officials told her she could no longer work there as a volunteer.

## Plagued by problems

This is not the first controversy for the scandal-plagued shelter.

In 2007, a county investigation uncovered food shortages and animal carcasses rotting in maggot-infested bags. In addition, employees were accused of taking "kindapet dogs" from the shelter and selling them for their own profit.

RELATED: Dogs left injured by loosed crates at Broward's new pet shelter »

The shelter made headlines again in 2010 after workers euthanized a family cat that had been microchipped. They discovered the microchip while he was dying. Officials later admitted staff had failed to follow protocol.

In 2014, a blistering report by the Broward inspector general accused the shelter of "gross mismanagement" and endangering the public by releasing dogs without rabies vaccinations and mishandling dangerous euthanasia drugs, including a date rape drug known on the street as "Special K." Rather than locking up the drugs indoors, animal care specialists kept them in their country or personal vehicles.

The county spent $16.5 million on a new animal shelter that opened in November 2016, not far from the old Army barracks that had served as the county's animal shelter since 1953. The new shelter, at 4400 SW 42nd St. in Fort Lauderdale, was built to hold 335 animals — 175 cats and dog dogs.

The busy shelter, which goes by the name Broward County Animal Care and Adoption, takes in more than 13,000 dogs and cats annually and is a long way from its goal of becoming a no-kill shelter — a mission approved by the county commission in 2014.

"Our goal is to be a no-kill community," Haley said. "We're aiming to have 90% of the population live released. Right now we are at 82%."

In her response to the most recent audit, County Administrator Bertha Henry blamed some of the problems on the fact that the shelter has gone through two directors in just five years. A third, Emily Wood, is expected to take over on Jan. 25.

A previous shelter director, Thomas Adair, resigned in September 2017 after he was caught altering documents to make it appear pets had been sterilized to the shelter to be euthanized when in fact their owners wanted their pet up for adoption. The practice made it seem as though the county was edging closer to its no-kill goal because animals put down at the owner's request were not included in official euthanasia totals.

## Turnover at the top

Adair had been selected as the shelter's director in November 2015 after seven months as interim director.

His successor, Lauralei Combs, took over as shelter director in March 2018 and resigned two years later after that surprise inspection put the shelter under the microscope again. Combs honed her skills at the Austin Animal Center in Texas, a no-kill shelter where she oversaw a staff of 50 volunteers.

Wood comes to Broward County from California, where she most recently served as director of placement and customer care with the Pasadena Humane Society and Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

RELATED: Animal shelter under scrutiny over squalidness and dirty cages »

Animal advocates say they hope Wood has what it takes to turn things around.

"You have to give somebody time to see if they can perform," Bogen said. "We're crossing our fingers and hoping we can get the right people. By mid-year we should have a shelter that's considered a quality animal shelter."

In Henry's letter to the county auditor, she said the shelter will come up with a "reset" strategy plan for developing the shelter into a "world-class" operation within six months of Wood's start date.

A dog pens out of its cage Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2020, at the Broward County Animal Care and Adoption shelter in Fort Lauderdale.
(Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Shelter officials will also provide quarterly updates to the commission until the board determines they are no longer needed, Henry promised.

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Soon after Wood's arrival, the county plans to set up an online dashboard that will be updated daily to provide public transparency to key shelter operations.

The dashboard would show how many animals are going in and how many are going out, whether via adoption, a rescue group or foster care. It might also show how many animals were euthanized that day, although Boman said that's still under consideration.

Haley says the shelter is a work in progress with a hard-working staff doing the best it can with the resources it has.

"There's a lot of things we can improve upon," he said. "The audit has shown us that. We can get better and we're going to get better."

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Topics: pets, animals, animal shelter

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