

Complaint: Dangerous dogs being released by city

By Colleen Heild / Journal Investigative Reporter | March 31, 2015

They have names like Pappy, Taz and Smokey – pleasant names to make them better candidates for adoption.

But these and dozens of other dogs adopted out of the city of Albuquerque's animal shelter last year have something else in common: They have killed and maimed other pets, bitten children, attacked their handlers or displayed other signs of aggression.

In more than 100 cases last year, the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department has allowed the dogs to be adopted by families or returned to their owners even though they flunked nationally recognized standardized tests that showed the animals had dangerous tendencies.

One dog was so aggressive he couldn't be tested, but was still adopted out. Some volatile dogs were even taken to the Lucky Paws adoption site in Coronado Center.

These are among the explosive allegations in a complaint filed with the city's Office of Inspector General by the Animal Welfare Department's second-in-command and its behavior specialist, who said Monday she has resigned out of frustration and alarm for the community.

Both say they have taken their concerns to city animal welfare director Barbara Bruin, who has dismissed their complaints, overruled their recommendations and even reprimanded them for raising the public safety concerns.

Bruin on Monday defended herself and the reputation of her department.

"Public safety is our No. 1 priority," Bruin said in a telephone interview. "We try to get every adoptable dog out alive, but we do euthanize several dogs a day for behavior issues." She said the agency took in 11,894 dogs last year.

The agency last year also touted a drop in rates of euthanasia.

"But in reducing our euthanasia rate, mistakes have been made and not enough has been learned from those mistakes," states the complaint from animal program analyst Jim Ludwick. "Our responsibility is not just to the animals staring us in the face as they stand in our cages. We have a responsibility to the animals and children who are out of sight and out of mind ... who might pay the price if we unleash the dogs we should euthanize for public safety reasons."

Ludwick, the No. 2 in command at the agency and an animal program analyst for nearly eight years, contends the department has been negligent in determining which dogs are put up for adoption.

Ludwick said of the 215 shelter dogs that failed the national standard behavior test known as "SAFER" last year, 100 were adopted into new households, while another 32 were turned over to rescue groups. The rest were reclaimed by their original owners.

Carolyn Hidalgo, animal welfare program manager and behavior specialist, said in an interview with the Journal on Monday, "I came forward because I want to give a voice to all my co-workers who have to go home and cry every day over this."

"I have had many conversations with Ms. Bruin, and in my view she does not have sufficient concern for public safety," Hidalgo said in her complaint, a copy of which was reviewed by the Journal.

Hidalgo's statement alleges that Bruin has urged her to change evaluations of animals and withhold information from memos and emails "to disguise the risk associated with certain dogs and to reduce the chance that the public will learn various facts."

On occasion, Bruin has telephoned "to reprimand me for disclosing negative information about individual dogs in various public records," the complaint states.

Peter Pacheco, who heads the city's Inspector General office, confirmed receipt of the complaint on Monday. "We are putting this as a priority case to be looked into further," he told the Journal.

The complaint includes 1,079 internal memos and 190 pages of kennel records.

Hidalgo said in an interview Monday that the push to make Albuquerque's shelter "no kill" paints a "very rosy picture and no one really knows what's going on behind the scenes."

Behind the scenes

Taz the pit bull, for instance, injured three animal shelter employees who were moving him out of his cage, according to the complaint.

The dog was "biting and chewing on the fence and pushing at the gate with all teeth showing," the complaint states. "Taz aggressively grabbed one employee by the hand at the gate ... attacked another staffer by the leg, grabbing the pants and tried to yank him into the kennel."

A third employee was injured when Taz yanked him by the arm. When an attempt was made to conduct a behavioral test, the complaint states, "It had to be stopped for safety reasons, and the leash was left on Taz because it was too dangerous to take it off."

Taz ultimately was adopted, the complaint states.

In all, the complaint profiles 16 adopted dogs whose names belie their aggressive actions and personalities. For example:

- Smokey, a Rhodesian ridgeback, was adopted but returned two hours later after trying to kill the family cat.
- Kobe, a Labrador retriever, tried to bite a little girl through the cage at an off-site adoption event and was put on the euthanasia list after failing the behavior test. But Kobe was later removed from the list and taken to the Lucky Paws adoption store at Coronado Mall, where he again was lunging at children and appeared fixated on other dogs. Kobe later was given to a rescue group.
- Mia, an American bulldog, was surrendered to the animal shelter for attacking and killing a dog. Five days later, she was adopted by another family.
- Mamba, a boxer, was surrendered to the shelter for killing a puppy. Mamba was adopted 18 days later, but was returned because of behavior problems.

Both Ludwick and Hidalgo said they have voiced their concerns to Bruin, who has headed the agency since 2009.

Ludwick's complaint states that Bruin has "belittled this issue," including the killing of a poodle in Northeast Albuquerque last December by a shelter dog named Pappy.

From the start, Pappy failed repeated behavior tests and had a history of aggression.

But after Pappy killed the poodle and bit its owner, the dog was returned to the shelter last December. Ludwick contends he put it on the euthanasia list. But within weeks, he was overruled and the dog was allowed to go to a rescue group. That group arranged for Pappy to be adopted by a West Side Albuquerque family last month.

“She (Bruin) says we should not be concerned if a dog in our shelters has a history of killing, especially if the victim was a small dog. We should become concerned only if the animal has killed large dogs,” Ludwick said in his statement.

Bruin, in the Journal interview, responded: “I would never belittle the killing of an animal by another animal. It was just a question of the degree of prey drive.”

She also said her agency is planning to tighten up its protocols for assessing dangerous dogs. “We’re constantly looking at our criteria that measures whether a dog is safe and deciding what’s acceptable,” she said.

Dog behavior is an area where even dog behavior specialists disagree, Bruin said.

“We try our best, but it’s not 100 percent,” she added, “It’s more of an art than a science.”

Dangerous conditions

Hidalgo, in the complaint, said keeping unsafe dogs in city animal shelters has added to the crowding and created a danger for employees, volunteers and animals.

“There have been dog fights, injuries to animals that were serious enough to require surgery, and injuries to people within our own facilities, such as a recent episode when a dog bit off the finger of a woman who was in one of our kennel buildings,” the complaint states.

Hidalgo stated that Bruin also complains about trained staff members who evaluate dogs, saying they are setting the dogs up for failure because they point out problems that would have a bearing on the safety of adoptions.

“She irrationally sides with volunteers, against career professionals, on issues where the volunteers are relatively unconcerned about public safety. In some cases, she has allowed volunteers to take dangerous animals out of our fenced compounds and into the general community, sometimes even taking them to other communities in New Mexico.”

Hidalgo said Bruin has criticized her for pointing out the danger of allowing certain extremely volatile shelter dogs to be taken to the Lucky Paws adoption center, where they might come into contact with children.

She told the inspector general in the complaint that she feels “uncomfortable working with Ms. Bruin in an environment where unethical and unsafe practices have become the norm.”

In the Journal interview, Hidalgo said Bruin has personally removed dangerous dogs scheduled by staff for euthanasia and put them on “hold,” sometimes indefinitely.

There are cases, Hidalgo said, where dogs are deemed “project dogs” to be worked with in an attempt to modify their behavior.

Hidalgo told the Journal that she plans to go into private practice as a trainer, even though her “heart is with the shelter animals.”

Red flags

Dogs that raise red flags, such as those that have killed other dogs or pets, bite people or have shown aggression, have won reprieves when they should have been euthanized, Hidalgo said.

At times, prospective owners are warned of a dog's behavior problems, Hidalgo said, but that doesn't protect unsuspecting neighbors or others who might happen upon such a dog in the community and get hurt.

The department's assessors who perform the behavioral tests on dogs are demoralized and question why they are making the effort when dogs that fail are still put up for adoption, she said.

The SAFER test, promoted by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, provides clues regarding the dominance and submission of an animal, and includes a sensitivity test assessing social skills and level of fear.

There's also a food aggression test that can show whether a dog might attack someone who comes close to or is perceived to be threatening its food supply.

Under the test, dogs are considered "easily adoptable," "in need of behavior modification," or are deemed "clearly unsafe dogs and not made available for adoption."

Hidalgo said that the test results are part of her overall assessment of a dog before she decides whether they should be euthanized.

"I'm not pro-euthanasia. I'm there when these dogs are facing their last breath; I'm the last person they see. But I know that I made the right choice," she told the Journal.

"I still want people to adopt dogs, and shelter dogs make wonderful companion animals. But it's our responsibility to make safe companions available to the public."

[Jim Ludwick Statement](#) by [abqjournal](#)

<http://www.abqjournal.com/562535/news/is-city-releasing-dangerous-dogs.html>