



## **37 bags of dead dogs found at home of 'rescuer's' mother Nicole Hulbig now faces eight counts of animal cruelty in Sumner County after 39 live dogs were seized**

By Stephanie Ingersoll, Leaf-Chronicle | June 9, 2014

**CLARKSVILLE, TENN.** — Hours after four dead puppies were found inside a Clarksville home Thursday, deputies in Sumner County went to a Cottontown home and found 37 bags containing animal remains and seized 39 live dogs from the woman who claimed she was running a non-profit organization that rescued dogs and trained them as service animals.

Nicole Hulbig, 29, was charged with four counts of aggravated cruelty to animals by Montgomery County Animal Control last week and eight counts of animal cruelty in Sumner County.

Deputies went to the home of her mother, where Hulbig lives when not in Clarksville, after they were contacted by Montgomery County Animal Control. There, they found numerous dead animals inside the same barn as 37 living dogs who were all in poor condition.

Because the dogs in the bags were so decomposed, deputies could not tell how they died, and the remains were too degraded to send them to a lab for testing, said Sgt. Sean Ryan of the of Sumner County Sheriff's Office Animal Control Division. Officers could not even tell how many dogs there were in all.

Ryan said because there is no way to tell how or even when the dogs died, Hulbig could not be charged in connection with those remains.

But 37 dogs were living inside the same barn, many without food or water, and eight were so emaciated that Hulbig was charged with animal cruelty, Ryan said. Two others were living in a utility room inside the home.

Hulbig says she is on bed rest because of a high risk pregnancy and the care of the animals was left to her 64-year-old mother. Her mother was not charged with any crime, said Sumner County Sheriff Sonny Weatherford.

Hulbig is the founder of RRR Service Dogs and claims she rescues dogs from kill shelters and pairs them with disabled soldiers or children with disabilities after she trains them to be service dogs.

The Leaf-Chronicle and the Sumner County Sheriff's Office Animal Control have been contacted by numerous organizations and individuals who say they turned dogs over to Hulbig for training as service animals and are worried about their fates.

Ryan said a few dogs have been reunited by owners or rescues who have proof of ownership, but the shelter has also received many emails with photos of animals who don't match any of the dogs seized from the home.

### **'It was horrible'**

It would be impossible to identify any of the dead dogs, he said.

"They were so far gone, you couldn't make heads or tails of it," he said. "It was horrible."

Ryan said Hulbig claims the dogs died after a distemper outbreak about nine months ago, but Ryan said there was no way to know if that's how the animals died. Officers verified that one dog had been treated at a veterinarian's office for distemper, a viral disease which can spread quickly among dogs that aren't vaccinated, he said.

Tennessee does not require animal rescuers to have their dogs vaccinated for anything other than rabies, he said.

He said Sumner County animal control officers had been to the Cottontown home several times since 2011 after receiving complaints and Hulbig always told them she was working to get nonprofit status, he said. Each time she was keeping multiple animals in the barn, he said, but until Thursday's visit, officers had no reason to remove dogs from her care.

She could never provide proof of nonprofit status and is now being treated "as an individual with too many dogs," he said. Hulbig was cited for animal cruelty and will have to turn herself in to be booked before going to court, he said. She was not taken to jail because of her medical condition, he said. The main focus for the animal control officers was to get the animals out of her control.

"Basically that's our goal, to get her out of business," Ryan said Monday.

But even the recently expanded shelter is struggling with the addition of 39 dogs. Ryan said the shelter usually houses about 30 dogs in all. He is hoping legitimate rescue organizations can help out by pulling dogs from the shelter after as many dogs as possible are reunited with owners.

### **'Where is he?'**

Chelsey Lanier of Clarksville is one of the many concerned animal owners desperate to find her dog.

She said Hulbig told her she could train her German shepherd, Flint, to be less aggressive by training him at her "ranch."

Lanier is a disabled soldier and Flint is her personal dog, not a rescue. But she said she was told that her dog was euthanized without her consent, although Hulbig would not provide any paperwork or answer her questions.

"For all I know, she just killed my dog and he's one of the ones in a bag," Lanier said. "My question is, where is he?"

Flint was not one of the 39 live dogs taken from the barn and the four dead dogs found in Clarksville are too small to be him.

### **Investigation started in Clarksville**

The investigation began Thursday after a representative for Bill Mace Home Builders went to 3300 North Henderson Way in Clarksville. The home had been rented by Nicole and Eric Hulbig in January. The condition of the home was described as "unlivable," with feces and trash found throughout the house and the decomposing remains of four dogs found in cages without food or water.

The woman who found the mess called Montgomery County Animal Control and Eric Hulbig was arrested the same day on four counts of aggravated cruelty to animals. A warrant was issued for Nicole Hulbig's arrest and she was booked into the Montgomery County Jail on Friday. Both were released on \$4,000 bond.

The Montgomery County Animal Control then contacted the Sumner County authorities.

Clarksville Police also took a vandalism report. It says damage to the Clarksville home was estimated at \$13,000 and that it appeared the tenants had abandoned the property. Masked workers were on site Friday working to remove belongings and decontaminate the home in Patrick Place subdivision.

On Friday, Nicole Hulbig told The Leaf-Chronicle that she had no idea how the four dead puppies came to be at the North Henderson Way home because she had been gone for more than a month after separating from her husband and had not left any dogs behind. She said all the dogs put in her care were accounted for and were fine. She declined to say where they were, or that 39 dogs had been taken from her mother's house already. Nor did she mention the dead dogs in bags.

"I'm not hiding. I'm not running," Nicole Hulbig said Friday. "I just can't deal with a thousand questions from a thousand different people because I don't know (what happened)."

### **'No food and water'**

Ryan said the dogs that were seized at the Cottontown home where Nicole Hulbig was staying were put in stalls in a barn. Most were in cages. Some were in cages that were too small for the animals to stand up or turn around.

Hulbig told officers her 64-year-old mother was caring for the dogs.

"We found many dogs with no food and water available," he said. "We found at least one dog ... with open wounds and skin issues."

Each dog's body mass score was rated on a scale of 1 to 9. An optimal score would be 5 or 6 but one of the dog was so bony, with his ribs, spine and hipbones visible that his score was a 1, Ryan said. Several dogs had ratings of 2 or 3. Those dogs were so malnourished that they led to the eight counts of animal cruelty. There was also a large buildup of feces inside the barn, he said.

Since The Leaf-Chronicle first reported the initial four puppy deaths and their connection to RRR Service Dogs, calls have been flooding in from people across the country who said they place dogs in Nicole Hulbig's care and are worried about them.

Ryan said the Sumner County shelter is usually closed on Mondays but was open this Monday because they were fielding so many inquiries.

"The ones we've talked to have been from all over, from Texas and California," he said. "We're asking them to email us their proof."

A few dogs have been reunited with owners, but many hoping to find their dogs are disappointed to find theirs are not among the 39 taken by animal control.

Inquiries can be made by calling 615-452-2616 or emailing [jclifton@sumnersheriff.com](mailto:jclifton@sumnersheriff.com)

"We still have at least 34 or 35," Ryan said Monday. "We are trying our best to get them out of here as quickly as possible... We're doing whatever we can to reunite them with their owners."

Those not reunited will be available for adoption or turned over to other animal rescue organizations.

Nicole Hulbig's arraignment in Montgomery County has been rescheduled to 10:30 June 20. Eric Hulbig is scheduled to appear in court at 10:30 Wednesday.

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