

LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

Corrections facility's drug-sniffing dogs sent to Santa Fe

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LAS CRUCES—Two drug-sniffing dogs in the middle of a tug of war over how they should be housed were picked up Tuesday and transported to the state penitentiary in Santa Fe to condition them to life in a prison kennel.

The Corrections Department stuck by its decision that the dogs, who work at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility west of Las Cruces, could no longer be kenneled at their handlers' homes—despite public outcry over what some were calling “inhumane” treatment of the dogs.

The state is “punishing these good dogs and treating them like robots,” wrote one reader in response to a Journal story published last week about the dogs' circumstances.

The Governor's Office and the Corrections Department each received dozens of e-mails and about 50 calls urging the state to let the dogs spend their off hours at their partners' homes.

But the decision to remove the dogs from kennels at their handlers' homes will not be reversed, Corrections Department spokeswoman Tia Bland said Tuesday.

“We are not really considering the handlers' homes as a viable Plan B,” Bland said.

The dogs, which have been trained to locate illegal drugs, patrol prison grounds and catch fugitives, will spend the next three months at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, where they will receive additional training, undergo health evaluations and get acclimated to kennel life away from their handlers, Bland said.

For years the dogs had stayed overnight at kennels at their handlers' homes, but the Corrections Department this year decided to enforce a 2005 policy requiring that all working dogs be housed at kennels on prison grounds.

The dogs, German shepherds named Ace and Echo, exhibited signs of stress after being moved from their handlers' homes to kennels at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Penitentiary.

According to AFSCME, the union representing the two canine officers, Ace began spinning repeatedly, chewed on his tail and ripped up a blanket during the 16-hour stretches he was not working with his partner. Echo lost weight, vomited and leaped at the kennel's chain-link fence, causing damage to his paws, the union said. One correctional officer asserted that, by distressing her canine partner, the state had created an unsafe situation, and she filed a grievance in an attempt to have her dog housed at the kennel at her home.

Bland, in her comments to the Journal for last week's article, said the dogs are not family pets but are “like prison property, so there's nothing inhumane about keeping them on prisons grounds in kennels. That's where they belong.”

Those comments seemed to fan the outrage.

“These animals put their lives on the line everyday for the safety of humans. They are not simply prison property,” wrote one reader.

“It is common practice in police and rescue organizations for service dogs and their handlers to live together,” wrote another. “It creates a bond and sense of trust.”

Handlers at the Albuquerque Police Department's canine unit are allowed to take the dogs home with them.

AFSCME representative Sam Chavez said the correctional officer who filed the grievance over the issue was upset by the department's latest decision to move the dogs to Santa Fe for reconditioning.

"I thought they'd show some compassion for the dogs, maybe, but not this department," Chavez said.

The Corrections Department acknowledged that Ace and Echo "experienced some separation and anxiety issues" after being housed in prison kennels, but said that was normal for dogs getting used to a new setting and that the dogs are fine.

If the reconditioning is successful, the dogs will be returned to Southern New Mexico Correctional and be allowed to resume working with their human partners, Bland said. If the dogs do not adapt to kennel life away from their longtime partners, she said, the department will retire the German shepherds, and the correctional officers will be allowed to seek adoption.

"We think we can work with the dogs to get them acclimated so they are fine. That's the direction we are taking," Bland said, "because we have invested in the dogs and if there's any way they can still remain productive, we'd like to see that happen."

Chavez said that retiring the dogs because they cannot adapt to the Corrections Department's policy of housing on prison grounds would be counterproductive and a waste of the expense of training the dogs.

Bland said the dogs cost about \$8,000 each and their training costs about \$7,000 each.

By moving the dogs to Santa Fe, Chavez said, the Corrections Department is continuing to mistreat the dogs and is undermining the effectiveness of the program. While the state tries to recondition the dogs to life in a prison kennel, Chavez said, the prison will be without permanent drug-sniffing dogs.