

Request for rabies records a tall order: Animal advocates question Humane Society's motive

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LAS CRUCES - To city-county animal shelter officials, fulfilling a recent petition for about 1,000 public documents is going to add lots of work to an already over-taxed operation. To the group seeking the records, it's a valid request aimed at finding out whether the shelter is following the rules.

And to yet other animal advocates, it's part of what they see as an attempt by the organization making the request - the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico - at creating stumbling blocks for the shelter.

At issue is a formal request from Frank Bryce, president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, to inspect about 1,000 rabies certificates. He's also asked for inspection documents for a recently renovated dog infirmary and communications between shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock and shelter board members.

Because Bryce has requested rabies certificates, which contain some personal information such as phone numbers, the documents must be printed out from a database and manually redacted, Vesco-Mock said. A staff person must then make a copy of the redacted version, she said, because often the redacted parts of an original are still legible underneath the marker. She said she expects it will take about 80 hours of personnel time to comply.

"That's going to be 80 hours of overtime, two full-time people for a week," she said. "And unfortunately we don't have the option here of telling our animals to (not) urinate and defecate for a week because we don't have time."

'To protect the public'

Bryce said Thursday he's submitted a request because he wants to find out whether animals that are part of the foster-to-adopt program are being vaccinated prior to leaving the shelter. The program allows individuals to keep pets in their homes, until the animals can be adopted. He said he has two copies of rabies certificates issued to people as part of the program, but they're not signed by a vet. He said the signature indicates a vet has signed off on the vaccination, and he wants to find out the shelter's practice.

"Somebody has to be responsible to say this animal has been vaccinated properly in order to protect the public," he said. "If the review shows there's an issue, we can correct it. If the review shows there's not an issue, then that's OK, too."

What's behind this?

Meanwhile, Sherry Gara, president of SNAP, a spay-neuter group, questioned the motivation of Bryce and the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, saying she's concerned they simply want to throw up hurdles for the shelter. She contended the group's actions detract from saving pets' lives.

Vesco-Mock "spends so much of her time rebutting what Frank is nagging about, and that concerns me," Gara said. "She's doing a great job."

Vesco-Mock said she's obligated by law to respond to the request, and she's already sent a formal response to Bryce. But, because of the size of the request and the amount of time it will take to fulfill, won't have the rabies vaccination records ready until after the holidays.

Rodent aftermath

Vesco-Mock said she referred the request related to the dog infirmary, an outbuilding adjacent to the main shelter building, to the city's facilities department.

Bryce said he submitted that request because he's concerned about whether the building was properly inspected by an electrician for damage to internal wiring, after a big rodent infestation. He said he met with city officials Thursday and wasn't satisfied that an in-depth inspection has been done.

"My fear is, without a good examination of that damage, we can't be sure that building won't catch on fire," he said.

Humane Society of Southern New Mexico members assured they've got the animals' interests at heart in the request.

"Everything this leads to is the safety of the animals and the staff and the stewardship of community and public resources," Bryce said.

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