

Prison dogs get pardon, to retire to handlers' homes

Staff and wire report

Posted: 01/02/2010 12:00:00 AM MST

SANTA FE — New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's first official act of the new year has gone to the dogs — good news for a pair of furry, four-footed law dogs at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility.

Richardson pardoned Ace and Echo, K-9 officers used for drug interdiction and fugitive apprehension at the prison west of Las Cruces. With the swipe of a pen, the duo are officially retired and will not have to live at the prison.

Friday's decision comes after many people urged Richardson to retire the dogs following recent changes in their handling and care and the likelihood that the animals would be unable to fully adjust. The two German shepherds, ages 4 and 7, now can be adopted by their handlers.

Working K-9s are housed in kennels on state prison grounds and 16 dogs currently do so without any problems. But for the past few years, the two German shepherds were allowed to go home with their handlers while the kennels at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility were under construction. When the two dogs returned to being kenneled on prison property, they exhibited signs of acute separation anxiety and the call came to retire them.

The German shepherds known for their sharp nasal skills, are now able to wile away their senior years living with their human partners.

"After looking closely at the requests from concerned New Mexicans from across the state, I have decided to pardon these dogs effective January 1, 2010, and allow them to be adopted by their handlers," Richardson said in a statement. "I am concerned about the well being of Ace and Echo and I believe pardoning the dogs is in their best interest."

According to the Albuquerque Journal, corrections officials maintained that the on-grounds kenneling policy, which is enforced at other state prisons, was in the best interests of the dogs. Department spokeswoman Tia Bland also said there were liability concerns with having the dogs off prison property. And she pointed out that the dogs were not pets, but "like prison property."

The housing was decried as cruel and inhumane after the story came to light.

Ace and Echo were shipped to Santa Fe on Tuesday, without their handlers, for a planned three-month stay in an attempt to "recondition" them to live in a prison kennel.

Animal Protection of New Mexico spoke up and asked the governor to step in. Friday, he did just that.

"Gov. Richardson has directed Corrections Secretary Joe Williams to retire the two German shepherds ... from service immediately," the statement from Richardson's office said. "The governor has also directed the Department of Corrections to re-evaluate its K-9 policies."

The Albuquerque Journal contributed to this report.

LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS