

Response questioned in puppy death incident

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LAS CRUCES - How long did it take?

Questions linger about the time it took authorities to respond to an incident Saturday in which a 4-month-old border collie mix was killed.

Richard Nelson McCord, 41, of the 800 block of Parkview Drive, was arrested Sunday by Las Cruces Police and charged with one count of extreme animal cruelty, a fourth-degree felony. McCord allegedly stepped on the puppy's throat for several minutes Saturday after earlier grabbing it by its neck, placing it against a fence and repeatedly kicking it until the dog stopped yelping.

A witness to the alleged attack, who asked to remain anonymous because of fears of potential retaliation, said it took too long for her to get through to someone who could check on the dog's welfare and investigate the incidents that led to its death.

"It took me a good hour and a half to two hours before I was able to speak to anyone over the phone," she said. "I tried calling the (Las Cruces) police's non-emergency number twice, Animal Control, anybody I thought I could talk to. I couldn't get through to anybody. All there was at Animal Control was a recorded message. Finally, after about two hours, I was able to speak to someone at the (Do-a Ana County) Humane Society."

Kathy Lawitz, president of the Do-a Ana County Humane Society, said she first heard from the witness shortly before 11 a.m. Saturday.

"She was upset, and crying, saying that the puppy was being kicked and thrown against the fence," Lawitz said. "I said police dispatch needed to be called. I got a call back less than an hour later that nobody had responded."

The witness said no one with Animal Control or the Las Cruces Police Department came to check on the animal's condition until Sunday.

Animal Control Officer Ellie Choate said her office responded soon after details of the incident became available Sunday, after receiving an e-mail from Lawitz.

"We checked into it right away, within five or 10 minutes of receiving an e-mail from the Humane Society," Choate said. "I received an earlier e-mail, but there wasn't enough information in it to send someone, so more information was asked for, and provided, in the subsequent e-mail."

"I was concerned with those claims that we never received a call. I checked with our dispatcher, who said there was no record of any call ever being received."

Las Cruces Police Department spokesman Dan Trujillo said calls to the department during the weekend are re-routed to the Mesilla Valley Regional Dispatch Authority (MVRDA), also known as Central Dispatch.

"After further investigation, we've learned that two calls were made to Central Dispatch, but no messages were ever left," he said. "The first time police became aware of this was at 5:11 p.m. Sunday when they were called by Animal Control."

According to the Police Department, the lifeless puppy was found in a trash receptacle outside of the apartment complex where McCord apparently lives.

"It's just sad it ended this way, really sad," Lawitz said. "Something like this should never have to happen again."

Michel Meunier, president and executive director of ACTion Programs for Animals, a Las Cruces nonprofit organization, said the incident only highlights a crucial need for better response time for reports of animal abuse.

"I'm concerned that in the eyes of law enforcement and the courts, animal life is unimportant," she said. "It's very sad to see that."

Sherry Gara, president of the Spay Neuter Action Program, also voiced her frustrations about the delay in response and of the perceived indifference to take stricter legal actions against people found guilty of extreme animal abuse.

"We need to have an animal court, altogether," Gara said. "(Animal abuse cases) don't get attended to in a timely manner, and having a court dedicated to that would really help. The legal system just seems to be really ill informed when it comes to animal abuse cases.

"...Once this is taken seriously, we're going to have much more enforcement."

Steve Ramirez can be reached at (575) 541-5452.

Who should you call?

- Las Cruces police said to report acts of extreme animal cruelty, people should call 911.
- During regular, weekday business hours, 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., calls can also be made to Las Cruces Animal Control at (575) 528-4100.
- Any calls made to Animal Control after regular hours will automatically be re-routed to the non-emergencies telephone number at Mesilla Valley Regional Dispatch Authority (MVRDA), (575) 526-0795.
- Callers to MVRDA's non-emergency line can expect to hear a recorded message, but they should not hang up, and should be prepared to leave a message if they want to report extreme animal cruelty.