

Two McDuffie Animal Services investigations completed; No abuse or mistreatment found

Both the Georgia Department of Agriculture and McDuffie County have completed their parallel investigations into allegations related to animal services locally. The completion of these investigations comes as we work toward reopening the shelter, which has been closed since mid-2022.

In relation to the Department's investigation, there was no finding of any abuse or mistreatment of shelter animals by McDuffie County. The consent order specifically states that: "The Department discovered no evidence of issues related to animal care." Further, McDuffie County's own internal investigation revealed no evidence of animal care issues.

The only finding in the consent order is related to discrepancies between McDuffie County's internal records and the records required to be transmitted electronically to the Department related to the intake and disposition of animals. All paper copies of files were in place, but some had not been uploaded by former staff into the state system. Under the consent order, which county commissioners unanimously agreed to Tuesday night, the Department of Agriculture issues a \$13,000 fine, which will be suspended for a two-year probationary period. If the county successfully completes the probationary period without any major violations, the fine will be forgiven. In addition, McDuffie County agrees to make at least \$13,000 in repairs/improvements to the animal shelter facility and to ensure that any future shelter employees will complete training with the Department's Animal Program.

Meanwhile, McDuffie County officials also looked into the various allegations and, with the completion of the Department of Agriculture investigation, we are announcing our findings/results. These include (but are not limited to):

Allegation: A group of dogs that had been promised to be transferred to the northern United States via a rescue group were improperly euthanized in early June 2022.

Finding: The allegation of improper euthanization is false. The dogs were designated for euthanization by the shelter's supervising veterinarian due to a disease outbreak, and no impropriety was found by the investigating parties.

Allegation: Multiple acts of animal cruelty and neglect occurred at the hands of shelter staff in the last several years.

Finding: Our internal investigation found no tangible indicators of abuse – other than a previously documented incident which resulted in internal discipline – despite a host of unsubstantiated second-hand and hearsay allegations. No video or images of abuse incidents by the county could be found or were provided to officials. To further investigate the allegations, the county requested the assistance of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and self-reported possible violations to the Georgia Department of Agriculture. To date, no investigation has resulted in any criminal charges or sanctions, and the Department of Agriculture specifically stated there were no findings of improper animal care in their consent order.

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Allegation: Shelter paperwork was improperly filed.

Finding: Based upon records investigation, this allegation was determined to be true. These records and findings were subsequently turned over to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the Georgia Department of Agriculture for review. While prior regular inspections of hard copies of shelter paperwork by a Department of Agriculture representative found no issues, the department did find issues with the digital submission of the documents to the department. The digital filing of records was the focus of the consent order: “Respondent subsequently determined that former employees failed to properly maintain and submit records to the Department during the period at issue.” Moving forward, the county will adopt standard operating procedures to ensure compliance with such guidelines.

Allegation: Unreported cash payments were made to and/or required by shelter employees.

Finding: This allegation was based on statements made both in interviews and on social media by one of the participants. During the county’s inquiry, no corroborating evidence could be found. However, due to the seriousness of this allegation, the county immediately met with the McDuffie County Sheriff’s Department, the Toombs Judicial District Attorney’s Office, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the Georgia Department of Agriculture, and subsequently turned over all relevant information. The GBI has since taken the lead in the investigation, and the county has been completely cooperative as their investigation continues. Further, the county is taking measures to ensure that anyone involved in such activity or anyone who condones such activity will not have role within the operation of the shelter.

Allegation: The supervising veterinarian was improperly billing the county for excessive charges related to the animal shelter.

Finding: This allegation was found to be untrue, based upon an inspection of records related to the veterinary services provided. This review showed procedures, tests, medications, euthanizations, and other treatments performed at a reduced rate for shelter animals. Moving forward, a contract delineating the individual cost for each procedure, test or wellness check will be in place to provide a clear system of checks and balances for this process.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this investigation has been the number of people who only recently reported issues with our Animal Service Department that supposedly occurred several years ago. The allegations had not been brought to the attention of the county manager or discussed in a county commission meeting in recent years prior to July 2022. Once the allegations were brought to our attention, an investigation was quickly initiated. Within a few days, we self-reported potential issues to the Georgia Department of Agriculture and requested their assistance. We also requested investigative assistance from the McDuffie County Sheriff’s Department, the Toombs Judicial District Attorney’s Office, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation related to possible criminal activity. We did not undertake any step of this investigation to persecute or target anyone. Our goal was simple: Thoroughly and transparently vet the myriad of complaints from residents and advocates. Any other characterization of the investigation is false and potentially, intentionally misleading.

To be clear, McDuffie County’s Animal Services Department fell short of the expectations of our community. It is now time to correct that. The next step for McDuffie County is a roll-out of a new Animal Services Department for our community, which will include a new staff and supervising veterinarian. This “new” shelter will be a cooperative, functioning part of our community. We will prioritize local adoptions, work with an extensive, diverse list of shelter partners and animal

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rescues, and establish a volunteer program in an effort to ensure the facility is fully accessible to everyone. Our goal is to provide a shelter that meets the needs of our community, while creating an environment where everyone feels welcome. We also want a department that is open to the critiques and comments of our residents. The email address animalservices@thomson-mcduffie.gov will remain active as an avenue for contact in addition to our social media pages, telephones and offices.

At the same time (and in the interest of continued transparency), we acknowledge the re-opening process has taken longer than we had hoped. The reasons for this are multiple. First, we wanted to wait for any investigations to be complete as we wanted to incorporate any findings into our operating procedures. Eventually, we knew we could not wait on these to be complete and decided to move forward in late October with a December 1 goal for re-opening. As we repeatedly said at the time, we knew that goal was aggressive, and we did not meet it. Part of the extended delay was the collection of applicants for the director position: We initially received three applications and felt like this was not an adequate pool. This is not to say the initial candidates were not qualified. Instead, for a position as important as our animal services director, we chose to look beyond expediency and err on the side of a thorough, detailed search to ensure the best, most appropriate leadership possible. We feel this decision and resulting delay will ultimately result in an Animal Services Department our community deserves.

As we move forward with plans to reopen the shelter, we are working to renovate the building, evaluating the services provided by the department and developing ways to get residents more involved. We do greatly appreciate the patience of our residents throughout this process, especially those citizens who were willing to listen to all sides involved in the unfortunate situation. We are grateful for the assistance of the Georgia Department of Agriculture in reviewing our shelter and look forward to taking the next steps to provide the best care for our community's animals.

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