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# Friends no longer: Ingham County shelter and animal support group at odds over pet sales

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## Friends no longer: Ingham County shelter and animal support group at odds over pet sales

By DANIEL STURM

On the last two weekends, 20 volunteers from the Detroit-based organization A Voice for Animals distributed more than 3,000 fliers around Ingham County saying, "Is your pet safe?"

The organization was trying to raise awareness about Ingham County's practice of selling lost pets to dealers for use in scientific experiments. Members called for an immediate ban of this practice.

Ingham County sold 26 dogs and 21 cats to research laboratories in 2002, receiving \$470 in payment. The shelter's contracts is with R&R Research, in Howard City.

In stark contrast, says Roseville resident Amber Sitko, who helped distribute the leaflets, three shelters in Detroit who process roughly 50,000 animal per year didn't sell any pets for medical experiments. According to the group, only eight out of 83 Michigan counties are selling live animals to "Class B dealers," who in turn sell the animals to research facilities.

In 2001 the Ingham County Board of Commissioners voted 10-3 to continue releasing animals to research laboratories for the purpose of medical research.

In mid-March, Ingham County Prosecutor Stuart Dunnings fired Allie Phillips, an assistant prosecutor, following allegations that she schemed to retrieve a cat that had been sold by the animal shelter for research. Phillips founded Friends of the Ingham County Animal Shelter, a nonprofit organization, in 2000 and gives seminars on animal law.

Dunnings suspended her without pay Feb. 28, two weeks after county animal control officials accused her and two other activists of scheming to sign a notarized statement saying Phillips was the cat's owner, and paying \$295 for the animal's return.

Dunnings said he suspended Phillips for encouraging someone to make a false statement to county government officials. Dunnings fired her after she refused to apologize.

Phillips' attorney, Frank Reynolds, commented: "The people involved in rescuing the cat asserted a claim of right to that cat. They'd paid money for the veterinarian bills, they'd paid money to advertise to save cats and they had an agreement with the shelter that they can make a rescue before an animal was either euthanized or sold for medical research."

Some of those leafletting said that Friends of the Ingham County Animal Shelter has been banned from doing volunteer work at the shelter, and the organization's Web Site says its "privileges" at the shelter have been "temporarily suspended."

The shelter's director, Roger Fleming, said Tuesday the organization's members have destroyed a relationship of trust they had built with him.

"We allowed them to come into the shelter to do garage and bake sales" to support pet adoptions, he said. "We sold t-shirts to help them raise funds."

Fleming said the organization was now being treated like all other volunteers. He said the organization was no longer being given access to files and use of the conference room, among other privileges. "If they want information, they'll now need to file a Freedom of Information Act request."

Sitko of the Detroit organization called the decision to "ban" FICAS a "sting operation." "The fliers distributed by FICAS must have angered some commissioners, and so they decided to get rid of them."

Sitko said the way the shelter in Mason was run made her "physically sick." She went to Mason on March 22 in order to rescue two cats from the adoptable cat room. "Bernie and Emma were in bad shape; one was coughing up blood. Bernie weighed only three pounds, when he should have weighed five," she said. Both cats had to be put to sleep.

At the shelter she noted a number of conditions that she believes don't comply with basic standards for an animal shelter:

- There was a lack of available disinfectant.
- Some cats were kept in the same room with dogs. In general there was not enough distance between dogs and cats.
- The cats she has rescued have been in bad shape. Some have had fleas, earmites, respiratory problems, or eyes infections. Cats with such conditions typically need to be isolated, she said.
- Cats were fed dried food but not enough canned food.

Now that FICAS volunteers are "banned," from the shelter she said, there are not enough people taking care of the animals.

She said that animal rights activists mistrust Fleming when he states that he'll "never allow an animal to go to research unless it would otherwise be euthanized."

Fleming said that the Mason shelter, unlike the Humane Society, was unable to pick the cats they took in but had to take all animals off of the streets. "This explains why some cats have fleas," he said. Fleming said that there were times "where we have more cats than we can possibly house," adding that there was only one room available in which cats could be isolated.

Fleming said the shelter's reputation is improving. "We work under a tremendous amount of scrutiny," he said.

"When I came to the shelter (in 1998), we were euthanizing 3,000 animals a year. We've reversed this number by a third since I've been here."

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