

Editorial: Dirty laundry at Memphis Animal Shelter

Bold steps must be taken if the city expects to get substantial help from the private sector.

Staff Reports

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The possibility that some Memphis Animal Shelter employees have had ties to dog fighting rings calls for a vigorous and thorough investigation by the district attorney general's office.

Whether the perception is true or not, it inflicts further harm to a contentious relationship between city officials and animal welfare advocates that ultimately won't help the city's image.

Suspensions that shelter employees might have been sending dogs to a cruel and painful death were reinforced last week when the results of a study by the Rotary Club's Memphis Animal Shelter Evaluation Committee were released.

The study showed that employees believe "certain individuals are exempt from the rules" at the shelter, which frees them for involvement in illicit activities such as dog fighting.

True or not, the accusation is just one of the negative factors that continue to overshadow positive steps being taken by the city, such as the move by the city's animal control operation into a new, more spacious facility last week -- a facility that, regrettably, is already full of abandoned animals.

There are plenty of other positive steps that local government can take, however, to persuade the public that Memphis is a community that has empathy for the plight of abandoned or mistreated pets.

One would be the adoption of stricter ordinances dealing with the issue, such as Shelby County Commissioner Steve Mulroy's proposal to require owners in unincorporated Shelby County to provide their pets with appropriate nourishment and care.

Obviously, the city must staff its animal control operation with people who have empathy for animals and will treat them with care, a prerequisite that would close the door to the participants in the Second Chance employment program for convicted

felons with a history of violence.

And although the establishment of a no-kill policy at the Memphis Animal Shelter presents a huge challenge, a commitment to work toward that goal would help the administration of Mayor A C Wharton enhance its credibility on the issue.

That means better transparency, better enforcement of existing ordinances, a more aggressive spay-neuter program, more volunteer recruitment, more foster care, more adoptions, more encouragement for people who want to give up their animals to keep them instead, more socialization of abandoned animals -- a series of steps that would show Memphis is committed to a humane approach.

Ultimately, reaching that goal will require the devotion of more resources to the animal control task, potentially with the help of a nonprofit entity with a humane orientation.

While some communities around the country have established highly regarded animal control operations with no-kill policies on public money alone, Memphis' efforts toward that goal would stand a greater chance of success with more private resources devoted to the job.

But attracting substantial private support will not materialize if city employees are in league with dog fighters.



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