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## Anxious hours end in cougar's capture

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Sara the cougar is carried back into the Wild Animal Orphanage on Friday after being caught near the facility on Leslie Road. The cougar had escaped earlier in the day. / SA

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Police recovered an escaped cougar after several hours of anxious searching in which more than half a dozen schools on the far Northwest Side kept students indoors, officials said.

Animal caretakers accompanied by police located the cat around 3 p.m. Friday and quickly shot it with a tranquilizer dart, authorities said.

The cougar - a 12-year-old named Sarah - was lying in brush about 100 yards from the Wild Animal Orphanage, where she slipped out of a gap in her enclosure earlier in the day, authorities said.

"She's awake and we're just waiting for her to be a little less groggy," said Suzanne Straw, a volunteer board member at WAO. "Veterinarians are looking her over to make sure she's recovering smoothly from the tranquilizer."

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Authorities believe she slipped out of her pen after the wall of a nearby enclosure was demolished, creating an opening she could get through.

Carol Asvestas, who ran the sanctuary for 30 years and lives next door, said she alerted police about the escaped cat after it attacked her dog Friday morning.

"My first reaction was to save the puppy," she said. "I kicked the cougar in the head, but that did nothing. It ran ... off my property and into the creek with the puppy in its mouth,"

Following a blood trail, Asvestas located the puppy and got it to a veterinarian. It's expected to recover.

In the search for the cat, police established a search quadrant of several square miles and had urged residents near Leslie Road and Loop 1604 to remain indoors.

A helicopter was deployed for hours, using an infrared camera to try to spot the fugitive.

Five elementary schools and one middle school brought kids inside after reports of the cougar's escape but released them to parents at the end of the school day without incident, Northside Independent School District spokeswoman Monica Faulkenbery said.

The principal at Galm Elementary, which was outside the search area, said his school also brought students inside from recess and locked them in classrooms after a

reported sighting nearby, but police later told school officials it was a mistake.

A woman had reported seeing the cougar blocks from Galm, but her description persuaded authorities that she had seen a bobcat or large house cat instead, principal Ben Muir said.

Straw said Sara was declawed and feeble with arthritis, had no history of being aggressive, and had lived at the facility for five years.

The wildlife orphanage consists of two parcels, a seven-acre lot on Leslie Road and a 102-acre property on Talley Road, according to the organization's website. A message on the website says the facility is in the process of shutting down and relocating its animals to other facilities across the country.

Authorities said many of the facility's cages are being disassembled and shipped elsewhere as well.

Nearly 200 animals remain at the WAO, including 20 tigers, three lions, one black leopard and more than 100 monkeys.

"It's been heartbreaking to see them go," Straw said, noting many of the animals housed at WAO come from private owners who no longer can take care of them. "But what happened today is a perfect example of why people should not have exotic pets."

Staff Writer Guillermo X. Garcia and News Researcher Kevin Frazzini contributed to



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