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Wild Animal Orphanage Seeks Fresh Start

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SAN ANTONIO -- An embattled animal sanctuary on San Antonio's northwest side is getting a new start.

The Wild Animal Orphanage on Leslie Road has a new executive director, Nicole Garcia, who is replacing Carol Asvestas, who founded the sanctuary in 1983.

It's been a rocky road for the past couple of years at the WAO, with complaints regarding animal care, environmental violations and financial fraud, but Garcia said she knows what she is getting into.

"I'm kind of stepping in here with a lot to handle at once," she said. "But we have such a strong team of people that I think it's gonna be great."

Asvestas' exit as CEO caps a summer of growing concern about the WAO, including a press conference in August where Asvestas denied allegations of mismanagement and admitted she did not know the exact number of animal deaths that had occurred since January. Later that month, the WAO Board of Directors accepted her resignation and that of her husband Ron Asvestas, who also served in a management capacity at WAO.

Garcia, a longtime employee and Asvestas' daughter, was selected to serve as executive director. Garcia said she and her mother are estranged.

"Right now, we are in a recovery type period," said Garcia, "as well as building for the future."

With just a few weeks under her belt as executive director, Garcia has opened the door to agencies that previously had to fight to get onto the grounds of the Wild Animal Orphanage.

"We've actually invited the USDA in to kind of give us a little bit of advice on different things that need to be changed," she said.

It's the same with the state attorney general's office, which recently requested years of documents from the WAO.

"We are providing them with everything that they had originally been asking for," Garcia said.

"We are working with them."

It's a new day for the sanctuary's animals as well. Bright new balls and other toys dot the cages that just a few months ago were nothing but dirt and weeds.

"We changed a lot of the enrichment items for the animals," Garcia said. "It's amazing what you see when they are just getting new smells, and they're getting to interact with each other, with different items. It's really ... it's different."

Garcia wants public trust back for the WAO.

"We are trying to be a little more transparent," she said. "Actually our doors are going to be very open to everybody and anybody."

That includes other sanctuary managers, who are offering their advice to WAO for the first time since it opened its doors. Garcia said there was no sharing of ideas with other sanctuaries under the old regime.

Perhaps the biggest change will be in how Garcia plans to run the WAO. She said the donations that support the sanctuary will mostly go to the animals, not to administrative costs as in the past. And she's hoping the new start for the Wild Animal Orphanage will be an open door for the public. "We're asking for volunteers," she said. "This is going to be a very open place now." The WAO has [released a list of items they need for the winter months](#). Those items can be found on the WAO Web site.