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Government Agencies Investigating Local Animal Sanctuary

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Posted By: [Laura Berryhill](#)



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Their job is to protect wild animals, but the News 4 WOAI Trouble Shooters are breaking news of a local animal sanctuary under investigation.

Over the years, the Wild Animal Orphanage in northwest Bexar County has rescued many animals from certain death. Now, that facility is being investigated by at least two powerful agencies, one looking into possible violations of the Animal Welfare Act.

"Mistakes are probably being made," said Kristina Brunner, a former board member at the Wild Animal Orphanage.

Brunner volunteered at the animal sanctuary for ten years, until she saw something she couldn't believe. Brunner says she snapped several pictures last December, when there were freezing temperatures in San Antonio. The photos show small cages with monkeys inside, a wet concrete floor, and plywood leaning against the cages to keep the freezing winds out.

"I even told one of the workers, this monkey is not going to survive if he doesn't get heat right away," said Brunner.

Brunner claims some of the monkeys subjected to those conditions later froze to death.

"How many of the monkeys froze to death?" asked News 4 Trouble Shooter Tanji Patton.

"I have records showing over five," said Brunner. "But five, for sure, died."

Outraged at what she saw, Brunner left the board and filed a number of complaints against the sanctuary. Both the state and USDA are now investigating.

Carol Asvestas, who runs the orphanage, denied our request for an interview. She referred us to her lawyer, Bill Aleshire. He calls Brunner's allegations "outrageous and vengeful."

"(There were) deaths of five monkeys in the course of about a week when he had freezing temperatures," Patton stated to Aleshire.

"I don't know what the conditions of those monkeys were," responded Aleshire. "And I don't know that these monkeys were in those cages. Neither do you."

Aleshire later admitted the monkeys died, but not from the cold or the conditions. He said they all had blankets and were suffering from other health problems.

Late Wednesday, the Trouble Shooters received some inspections performed by veterinarians affiliated with the Wild Animal Orphanage. They show the animals' conditions to be adequate for South Texas winters.

News 4 WOAI traveled to another wildlife refuge in Kendalia, to compare how that location protects animals from the cold.

"You have to do heat checks," said Lynn Cuny, who operates Kendalia's Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation.

Cuny told us, when it is cold outside, the animals stay warm inside heated buildings.

The city of San Antonio appointed Dr. Craig Brestrup to temporarily run the city pound during the summer. He is currently Director of Development at Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation.

Trouble Shooter Tanji Patton showed Brunner's photos to Brestrup.

"Obviously, there's a lot of space between the plywood and the cage," commented Brestrup on one photo.

"If these are, in fact, the cages the way they were during the nights it froze back in December, was that adequate protection for those animals?" asked Patton.

"Would you or I like to be in there if it was freezing?" replied Brestrup. "No, there's no way in the world that could be adequate."

While the USDA investigates the monkey deaths, the state is investigating what it calls two animal burial pits located in a remote area of the Wild Animal Orphanage. It is an area that houses many animals, some of which are primates infected with HIV and hepatitis.

"How many animals were buried in those pits?" Patton asked Aleshire.

"There were scores of animals over the last several years," Aleshire replied.

State investigators cited the Wild Animal Orphanage for burying animal remains without the proper permits. Investigators have also asked for the dead animals' health records.

"There were no animals that would have been where there might be any issue about any disease that were buried there," said Aleshire.

"If you have that documentation, why wouldn't you make it available?" asked Patton.

"We'll make it available to the regulatory agencies that are entitled to see that information and whose job it is to see that," responded Aleshire.

The News 4 Trouble Shooters received a letter from the Wild Animal Orphanage to the state, admitting the dead animals' remains "may be in a floodplain" and stating the sanctuary plans to "remediate the site by removing the carcasses and depositing them in a permitted landfill".

The USDA and state investigations are ongoing. The Trouble Shooters are staying on top of this story and will let you know what happens.