

Jury awards \$100K to ex-animal services director for false statements made by Lake Sheriff's Office



Lake County Animal Services supervisor Jennifer Ferguson holds an arm full of kittens in June 2014, at the shelter in Tavares. (Sentinel file photo)



By **Martin E. Comas**
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A federal jury awarded more than \$100,000 to the former director of Lake County's Animal Services Department, saying she was wrongly fired and her character defamed by the Sheriff's Office and an employee in 2014 after a total of 147 pets were euthanized within nine days after she was hired.

"My name is now clear," Jacquelyn Johnston said in a written statement released by her attorney. "The reported reasons why some of these pets were killed were false. Their lives were cut short as a result of efforts to harm me as director, and these pets paid a price."

Sheriff's Lt. John Herrell said the agency has no plans to appeal the verdict "as this situation took place four years ago under a previous Sheriff."

Johnston said she plans to use a portion of the award — along with her own money — to set up The Harry Fund that will provide up to \$300 grants to shelters across Florida to medically treat dogs diagnosed with heartworms. Harry was a Hound mix who was euthanized after residing at the Lake County animal shelter for 59 days without receiving treatment for heartworms.

Johnston's attorney, Jason Gordon, said his client is trying to put her life back together by working toward a doctorate degree in geography in South Florida. Because of the negative publicity her case generated in the news and on social media, Johnston likely will never be able to work in the animal services field again, he said.

"This is something that will follow her forever," Gordon said from his Fort Lauderdale office. "You don't move on completely from something like this."

According to the lawsuit filed in Orlando, Johnston said former Lake County Sheriff Gary Borders and his office intended to destroy her reputation and bolster Borders' reputation by announcing her termination publicly, and that news agencies from around the country and even "as far away as London" quickly picked up the story.

Her suit says she received threats posted on social media including calling for her to be euthanized, lit on fire and sodomized to death.

On Oct. 1, 2014, the same day Johnston was hired, the Sheriff's Office under Borders assumed control of the Animal Services Department.

Johnston was fired Oct. 10 — nine days into her probationary period — after it was discovered that the animals were euthanized.

The Sheriff's Office released a statement to the media Oct. 13 stating that "some of the animals were put down prematurely because the shelter was not yet at capacity even though Johnston gave the reason for euthanizing the animals as limited space. ...Johnston made a bad call and euthanized some dogs that could have made good pets for people."

In her lawsuit, Johnston called the Sheriff's Office statements inaccurate and intended to destroy her professional reputation. Johnston also said in the suit that then-shelter supervisor Jennifer Ferguson lied to her about a previous policy of euthanizing animals to make space for new ones. Ferguson also was concerned that not enough adoptable animals from an isolation area were being seen by the public in the common area.

According to the suit, Johnston was driving to Miami to attend a class when animals at the Lake shelter started being euthanized.

"Ferguson went completely rogue, defied Johnston's instructions, pulled far more animals than necessary, and euthanized more animals than needed," the suit stated.

The jury awarded Johnston \$65,000 for the Sheriff's Office making false statements and violating her constitutional rights, and \$35,000 for Ferguson making false statements with the intent to harm the former director. The jury also awarded Johnston \$100 in punitive damages.

Ferguson, who was named as a defendant in the lawsuit, is currently employed as a lead animal enforcement officer for the Lake Sheriff's Office.

Neither Borders nor Ferguson could be reached for comment.

mcomas@orlandosentinel.com

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