Marlborough man faces additional animal-cruelty charges

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New animal-cruelty charges have been filed against a Marlborough man as a judge considers whether his several dozen Labrador retrievers can live in temporary foster homes for the duration of the case.

John Riggieri, 58, is accused of keeping 52 Labrador retrievers in unsanitary conditions and neglecting them to the point that some had untreated wounds or illnesses.

The animals have been in the custody of the Monadnock Humane Society since July, when they were taken from Riggieri's property on Shaker Farm Road South during an eviction proceeding.

Assistant County Attorney Benjamin W. Maki has asked a Keene court to allow the society to place the dogs in vetted foster homes, pending the outcome of the case.

Housing Riggieri's dogs "is crippling the organization," Maki wrote in an Aug. 9 motion. He argued temporary homes would be better for the dogs than staying in the shelter, and would also ease the strain on the society.

The Swanzey shelter is housing twice as many dogs as it has kennels, which has hindered its normal services, Emily Kerylow, the organization's director of operations, wrote in an affidavit. "Currently there are multiple dogs housed in each room and dogs residing in staff offices and a public visiting room," she wrote. Forty-seven dogs are at the society, with the remainder fostered with a society employee, according to court documents.

The organization has been unable to accept owner-surrendered animals, Kerylow wrote, as well as two dogs that came to it under a program that houses pets for those escaping domestic violence, experiencing homelessness or entering rehab.

As of last week, caring for the dogs had cost the society more than $47,000 in expenses or lost revenue, she wrote.

At a hearing Tuesday in 8th Circuit Court District Division in Keene, Riggieri objected vigorously to Maki's request. He claimed the humane society was trying to put the dogs in permanent homes and reap a windfall in adoption fees.

Maki said the society, on behalf of the state, is merely trying to follow standard procedures for storing evidence that happens to be alive.

Riggieri was first charged with four counts of animal cruelty Aug. 3. Maki on Friday added six new counts of the charge, which include allegations that Riggieri failed to treat at least 20 dogs for a range of medical conditions, including hookworm and giardia. All 10 charges are misdemeanors.

In an affidavit filed Monday in court, Lt. Caleb Dodson of the Cheshire County Sheriff's Office recounted the July 10 eviction that led to the animal-cruelty charges.

He described a chaotic outdoor scene, permeated by the stench of feces and urine, in which about a dozen dogs — some with visible wounds — snarled at one another over a line of food dumped in the driveway. Others barked from a second-floor window or elsewhere in the house, Dodson wrote.

Venturing inside, Dodson "found the residence completely covered (in) dog feces, urine and dirt" and the furniture "destroyed and chewed up," he wrote. Monadnock Humane Society staff had already removed a litter of puppies from a bathtub; when Dodson opened the door to the bathroom, he wrote, he was momentarily repelled by a strong smell of ammonia.

"The tub was smeared with feces," he wrote. "There was a container of liquid, which appeared to be their water dish, but was yellow with urine."

The conditions in the bathtub are the subject of one of the earlier charges, which alleges the puppies "sustained injuries from overexposure to their excrement."

The new charges claim Riggieri failed to treat one dog for tapeworm; four dogs for ear inflammation; 11 dogs for giardia, a parasite that infects the gastrointestinal system; and 20 dogs for hookworm. Two other charges accuse him of housing 16 dogs in a way that led to injuries and keeping all 52 dogs in unsanitary conditions.

Some of the dogs are mentioned in multiple complaints. A dog named Dean Martin allegedly suffered from giardia, ear inflammation and hookworm. Opie allegedly had a tapeworm and scarring.

Dodson took all of the animals into temporary protective custody, according to Maki's motion. New Hampshire's animal-cruelty statute allows that when an officer has good reason to believe an animal is or has been abused or neglected and "there is a clear and imminent danger to the animal's health or life."

Riggieri has disputed the state's allegations, telling The Sentinel earlier this month that "the facts that abound about this case are very, very problematic for the people who are making claims against my good character."

Riggieri declined to talk to a reporter at the courthouse Tuesday after learning he worked at The Sentinel.

Should Riggieri be convicted, he can be held responsible for the costs of housing and treating the animals until that point, according to New Hampshire law.

Though a trial on the 10 animal-cruelty charges has been scheduled for Sept. 14, Tuesday's hearing was an indication that the case could take longer.

At the outset, Riggieri, who is representing himself, produced a motion to stop the hearing and transfer the prosecution to federal court, taking Maki and Judge Erin B. McIntyre by surprise.

The hearing went ahead nonetheless. The hour-long proceeding, full of cross talk and interruptions, kept veering into tangents, seeming to frustrate Maki.

"Your honor, if we could just stay to the issues," he said at one point.

Riggieri said he has two people ready to take two litters of puppies and their mothers. He argued that would leave a manageable number of dogs at the shelter.

At one point, though, he seemed to float an alternative. "If their foster homes want to purchase the puppies … write me a check," he said.

"I'm not doing a negotiation for the sale of evidence," Judge McIntyre responded.

She did not immediately issue a decision on the fostering issue.

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