

## Cruelty investigator visits can end happily

By Wendy Depuy, Cabinet.com

Staff Writer

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Wendy DePuy photo

Cruelty Investigator Maureen Prendergast holds two kittens born to a cat recently taken from a hoarding situation.

When Maureen Prendergast walked into a Bethlehem residence last month, she was overwhelmed by the stench of cat urine.

Within an hour, the ammonia fumes from the waste of at least 25 cats had given her a severe headache.

"The conditions were deplorable," said Prendergast, the animal cruelty investigator for the Animal Rescue League of New Hampshire in Bedford.

"You try to adjust a little bit, but it's overpowering, and it stays with you for a couple of days, it stays in your mind," Prendergast said.

The Bethlehem health officer had requested her assistance, Prendergast said.

That situation is one of Prendergast's four open cases this month, including two in Manchester and one in Milford. They are all "hoarding" cases, where residents keep multiple cats in unsanitary conditions.

Those conditions can cause serious illness, according to Milford Health Officer Bill McKinney – in both cats and people.

A photo in Prendergast's office shows an orange tabby kitten with gruesomely infected eyes, a common illness for cats living in filthy, overcrowded spaces.

The cat's sinuses can become so blocked that the animal can't smell anything, so it stops eating and deteriorates further, Prendergast said.

Convincing the owners to voluntarily surrender most of the animals and take good care of the rest is often the best outcome, Prendergast said.

"For many people, the animals are their family, their support system, and I know if we took

them all, they would go out and get more," she said.

Another one of Prendergast's photos shows the same kitten restored to health after it was removed from a hoarding situation and treated by a veterinarian.

The little cat, which Prendergast called Amos, was one of 100 cats taken from a Milford storage locker in 2006. It was quickly adopted, one of the many happy endings that keeps Prendergast going despite the horrors.

Those are tough to take, especially when the cruelty seems to be inflicted knowingly, Prendergast said.

The extreme suffering of three German shepherds in Goffstown in 2005 was one such case.

Prendergast got a call from a contractor who had just seen the dogs.

"He was walking around in the yard and saw them, and called the rescue league," Prendergast recalled. "He was one of those stand-up people. He made a monetary donation, he wanted to follow up, he was willing to make a police statement. He really cared."

When Prendergast knocked on the door, there was no answer. But the dogs were in plain view, caged in narrow kennels in the yard. Prendergast still has photos of them, showing their poor condition.

The dogs had no shelter from the hot sun and no water, Prendergast said. They were underweight, living in their own filth. Their bald skin showed through where their fur had fallen out. Discharge was leaking from their eyes and ears, indicating the presence of multiple infections.

These were exigent circumstances, Prendergast decided, and the police agreed with her. Within two hours they had a court order to remove the animals, she said.

Prendergast, who has worked at the ARL since 1996, knows how to handle troubled animals. In the case of the German shepherds, she brought them into the ARL's vehicle and took them straight to a veterinarian.

Unfortunately, the damage was irreversible. The dogs had heartworm, and were too sick and weakened to endure heartworm treatments, which are harsh, Prendergast said.

In such cases, animals are euthanized. But when a court case is pending, the suffering animals must be kept alive as evidence.

"It's hard for me to rescue an animal only to make it linger for a court prosecution," Prendergast said. "But otherwise, there would be no record of the guy's crimes, so it would look like a first offense the next time he did it."

The owner of German shepherds made a deal that gave him a clean record in exchange for surrendering the dogs, Prendergast said.

Knowing the man is free to own dogs again is hard to stomach, she said.

But those cases are rare in Prendergast's job.

Most of the time, cooperation is what works.

"Sometimes it's just a matter of people not knowing, or having fallen on hard times or needing help," Prendergast said.

Some people might just need a donated doghouse. Others might not realize that animals need adequate shelter and access to drinkable (unfrozen) water, said Prendergast.

Sometimes people just get overwhelmed.

Three weeks ago, Prendergast met a Milford couple whose cats had been reproducing, as cats will, until there were 13 of them. And not all of them were using the litter box.

"It was out of control. There needed to be better housekeeping," said Milford Health Officer Bill McKinney, who'd called Prendergast.

Prendergast said she welcomes every call, and if she comes knocking at your door, it's nothing to fear.

"I follow up on everything," Prendergast said.

Most of the time, calling Prendergast means a happy ending for everyone, she said.

The Milford couple will keep two or three of the cats, which the ARL will help them get spayed and neutered.

How important is it to do that?

Two weeks ago, they gave 10 cats the ARL. By Tuesday, those 10 cats had become 14.

The 10 adults and four kittens will soon be up for adoption.