

Dogs taken in Marlborough man's animal cruelty case can be fostered, judge says

By Sierra Hubbard, Keene Sentinel Staff
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A judge ruled Friday that more than 50 dogs removed from a Marlborough man's home in an animal-cruelty case may be placed in foster care.

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. He faces 10 misdemeanor charges.

Assistant County Attorney Benjamin W. Maki filed a motion Aug. 9 asking a Keene court to let the Monadnock Humane Society place the dogs in vetted foster homes, pending the outcome of the case.

Riggieri, who is representing himself, objected to this.

Judge Erin B. McIntyre granted Maki's motion to move the 51 dogs that are considered evidence into foster homes. Court documents don't specify why all 52 dogs were not included.

The judge had a few stipulations: The dogs can't leave the state; the humane society must inform the foster homes that the animals are part of criminal proceedings; foster parents must make the dogs available to the court if needed; and the animals are subject to immediate return "upon further order of the court."

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.

Maki wrote in the Aug. 9 motion that housing Riggieri's dogs "is crippling the organization," arguing temporary homes would be better for the dogs and would also ease the strain on the humane society. On Aug. 10, Riggieri, who is representing himself, filed a motion asking the judge to release the animals back into his custody.

In a court hearing this week, Riggieri claimed the humane society was trying to put the dogs in permanent homes and benefit from the adoption fees.

Kathy Collinsworth, the executive director of the Monadnock Humane Society, said the staff and volunteers were elated when they heard about Friday's order.

"There was a significant amount of crying and hugging," Collinsworth said.

Emily Kerylow, the organization's director of operations, wrote in an affidavit that the facility is housing twice as many dogs as it has kennels. Forty-seven dogs are at the society's shelter in Swanzey, with the remainder fostered with an employee, according to court documents.

"Currently there are multiple dogs housed in each room and dogs residing in staff offices and a public visiting room," she wrote.

Caring for the dogs had cost the society more than \$47,000 in expenses or lost revenue as of last week, Kerylow wrote, and it hasn't been able to accept owner-surrendered animals because of overcrowding.

"Being able to put them in foster homes, the cost goes from \$20 per dog per day to \$3 per dog per day," Collinsworth said.

Many people contacted the humane society and offered to foster a dog when the news spread about the situation at the shelter, Collinsworth said. The organization has compiled a list of those interested, though she said everyone must sign a contract specifying the animals are part of criminal proceedings, and each family must be thoroughly vetted, including through a home visit.

The humane society will start contacting staff members, family and friends who have volunteered to take dogs, Collinsworth said, and then branch out to other households.

She expects the undertaking of finding foster homes for all the animals to take at least two to three weeks. Because the vetting process is so arduous, Collinsworth said households without children or other pets are ideal — if there are kids or other animals in the home, the society has to spend additional time introducing the foster dog to the family and ensuring it's a good fit.

Some of the dogs from the case are puppies as young as 9 weeks, according to Collinsworth, and they haven't had many opportunities to socialize.

"It's a little bit of work to prep, but we're super relieved, mostly just for the animals," Collinsworth said. "... They're just great dogs, and they're just looking to be loved."

McIntyre heard arguments on the motions at a hearing Tuesday in 8th Circuit Court District Division in Keene. In Friday's order, she denied Riggieri's request to release the dogs to him, explaining that the state is entitled to maintain the animals' safety, since they are evidence in a court case.

The judge also denied Riggieri's motion to transfer the case to federal court. McIntyre wrote in the order that all 10 complaints against Riggieri will be tried on Sept. 14.

Riggieri was first charged with four counts of animal cruelty Aug. 3, but Maki added six additional counts on Aug. 17.

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.

Inside Riggieri's home, 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, he wrote.

"The tub was smeared with feces," Dodson 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."

Additional charges assert that 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.

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 allegations and told 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."

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