

Calling in the Cavalry

Seizing 126 horses from an appalling hoarding situation, Marion County Animal Services knew exactly how to rally the troops

In this excerpted interview, Jill Lancon, director of Marion County Animal Services in Ocala, Fla., describes how her department tackled an unusual hoarding case. She explained to *Animal Sheltering's* Alexandra Kleinkopf how shelters burdened with a sudden influx of animals from major seizures can reach out to the community for help with the daunting task.

Animal Sheltering: What was the situation like, and how did Marion County Animal Services become aware of it?

Jill Lancon: We received numerous complaints from citizens that were going by [the] property, seeing these miniature horses in deplorable conditions. They were starving, they had real fuzzy, matted coats, feet overgrown like little elf shoes. ... It had been occurring over the years, and [the owner] would correct the problem, and horses would start to do better, and then she would get rid of some of her herd, and then the numbers would increase again.

So she had as many as 200 [horses] and as few as 70. At this point she had 126 on the property when we went out to do a search on the property. And we found one that was down—you know, barely alive—and [our investigators] had her call a vet immediately and come out, and they started to give him some support.

There was no feed on the property, no hay, nothing but sand lot. She had 18 acres of nothing but sand and a few weeds. Our temperatures at that point were in the 90s. ... So what we did is we immediately went in and said, "Look, this is what you need to do," and started giving her the things, and her big excuse was, "Well, I'm a rescuer."

... There were 65 mares and 45 stallions, and all of the mares were pregnant—who knows by who? And there are horses from varying ages: from newborns being dropped on the ground or were on the ground, to el-



The miniature horses were in bad shape when seized. Many were weak and showing signs of severe malnutrition.

derly. There were several with eye injuries, there were several that [were] club-footed, a lot of hip and joint problems in the hind quarters, and everybody running together. ...

[There were] a lot of areas on the property that had been freshly dug, and witnesses had come forward and said that the week before, five horses had died. And I would believe that. I would believe horses had died on this property, because of the condition that these horses were in. ... They found little miniature horses that were little skeletons inside of horse trailers with newborn foals at their side.

How did the owner acquire these animals?

She claims she had been given them. Numerous people had come forward and said they had sold them to her; other people have said they've seen her at the auction ... buying horses. But ... if you looked, you could tell that there was a herd; they were all the same. All the same color, all the

same markings. There was a lot of inbreeding, a lot of dental problems when we really started looking at these horses and looking at their teeth. ...

This had been going on for a seven-year period of time, and when I took over Animal Services in April—April 25—this case was one of the first things put into my lap as the new director of this department, and I said, "Okay, this is gonna stop now." And that's when we moved forward immediately. And within that month, we had our own vet out there. We had an assessment done on every horse. This is a statement from the vet's report that's sitting in front of me. It says, "Without immediate intervention, many of these animals are in immediate danger of dying of starvation."

Would you consider this a hoarding case?

Absolutely. This was a classic hoarder. She felt she had done the right thing for these horses. She did not feel her horses were

thin by any means. I'd say she was classic: classic age, 44 years old, single woman. You know, the interesting thing with this woman is her job was she worked on thoroughbred farms. When we served her her warrant for seizure, we served it to her at her workplace, and that was at one of the big thoroughbred farms here in Ocala.

How long did it take for the horses to be seized?

We took them immediately. We had an emergency petition for custody put in immediately, and we seized all the horses. So from the time we started our investigation and looking into it and trying to make communication with this woman, and then going on the property, [it] was less than 30 days. And so by June 1, we had seized all of the horses off the property, and then it took up to the three months by the time the court ruled. We got back into the court system for the actual custody.

Does Marion County Animal Services usually handle horses?

It's actually in our ordinance that we do handle livestock, and being in the horse capital of the world, we do see a lot of cases.

Is the county able to handle that financial burden?

Absolutely. We have an adequate staff to maintain care, between the sheltering staff and the officers that are on the road. I have a staff of 48. I have a very good working relationship with the sheriff's department. One of the captains ... manages the inmate work farm, where they do all of the produce and all of the growing for the jails. And [he] and I are partners on a 40-acre parcel of property, so he maintains the fencing and the mowing with his inmates. The inmates all did the stall cleaning and helped with the care of the horses and helped us move hay.

We had a local feed supplier; Seminole Feed has an excellent program where if we do anything seizure under warrant for cruelty, they will automatically step in, and they supply all of the feed. So that was an incredible savings. They bring us scales; they do weights. They help us maintain the weight to make sure these guys are growing. They set up a whole nutritional program. They set up a deworming. ...



After three months of TLC, the seized horses were looking fat and happy.

We had some incredible results in three months. We had some other hay dealers that stepped forward and donated rolls of hay. Our Florida Thoroughbred Farm Manager's Association, they donated like \$5,000. They supplied dewormer, they supplied the vaccines. So a lot of those things, the community stepped up and really helped with. ...

What will happen to the rescued horses?

Four were euthanized because of their condition and because they were so crippled that they literally weren't going to be able to recover from the crippling conditions they had, which actually ended up being genetic problems. ... And we had one die ... from the stress of the move. ... Otherwise, everyone else has been adopted. ... They're all doing really well.

Are there any laws being passed to prevent cases like this?

... I tried to have the judge [bar] her from owning any horses again, providing she's in Florida. ... [W]hen our attorney, the county attorney, filed the paperwork, he should've put that in the request. Instead, we just requested for custody, and what we should've done is ... requested for custody and requested that we bar her from ever owning animals again. I've done that before with a hoarding case, but this one we failed to do that. So it's a lesson learned. Could she re-

peat it? Absolutely. Are we on the lookout for her? You bet.

What other steps are being taken against this individual?

We are doing a criminal case, and what happens is you want to bar [hoarders] from owning animals on the civil side, because then that's for life; where if you do it on criminal, it only holds as long as around probation.

Are there other ways to combat hoarders before the situation gets too serious?

I think this seizure has come across with a very loud message in Marion County, and it's amazing how many people have stepped forward to say, "I can't afford to feed our horse. Can you help us find it a home?" So we've helped do that. I mean, we don't normally take animals, horses or cows, as a sign-over, you know, like an owner turn-in. But we definitely will give them names of people to help them find homes for them. ...

Do you have any advice for shelters that suddenly have to take on hoarding victims?

Do an outreach to the community and see who can help [the shelter] with the extensive care that's going to be involved, with the supplies that might be needed. And make sure [ACOs/ investigators] do a really good job photographing, of inventorying,

and then use the community's outreach and let them help with that case. Sometimes [shelters] can go to some of the different farms and see if they have properties that they will allow them to use to keep horses or cattle on. 'Cause those are the biggest problems when you have this livestock. Since this case, we are now going out and we're buying a horse trailer, so that's one of the things the county is investing in, because I personally used my horse trailer for all these haulings, up and down the road. And luckily the little ones were easy. If they were 126 big horses, that's a whole 'nother dilemma. These little guys made it easier to deal with.

And as far as advice for the legal process?

I would say *definitely* make sure they do a proper inventory. Photograph immediately. Use number boards so they can identify that horse to that number and follow it through. ... Look at some layouts of pictures and what gives you the best angle to present in court. Use some of the biggest pictures ... [and] develop them big so the court's able to see them, because the pictures actually speak for that animal. No doubt about that. And do "after" pictures—you know, before and after. And definitely, if they have these and people don't have that knowledge of livestock, get a nutritionist. Get somebody that can help them. We found the biggest thing with these is parasite infestation, so

deworming them was really one of the biggest impacts they had. ... The outpouring of the community was what was amazing, and I think it was because they were all these little miniature horses. I don't know if we'd have had it if they were large horses, but we did get it.

What are some examples of doing effective community outreach?

We actually did a press release, worked with the media. We called the media in on this case before we started the seizure. We wanted them to know we were doing this large-scale seizure. We had television stations that followed us. They waited at the property, they watched us serve the warrant, they filmed all of this stuff—it made 6 o'clock news, 7 o'clock news, 10 o'clock news, 11 o'clock news—these people were blasted with what was going on with this case. So I'm not saying that's in every case, but I think with these big hoarding cases, you let the media come in and sensationalize these cases. Give 'em a story and let them write it, and give them the information that you want them to have. That was important.

The newspapers followed this, and then when we needed something we would put a plea out on the media and say, "This is the condition, this is how the horses are doing, but we really could use help." Well, people stepped forward with like 120 little miniature halters, you know, we have halter manufacturing companies and things like that. But people even went through their barns and brought in supplies that they didn't need. So it was really a neat thing, and it was done through the media.

Any cattlemen's association that [shelters] may have in their communities. Horse clubs. 4-H in their communities. You know, it really depends on what is in that community, and this happens to be a horse community, so horses are big. People, their hearts bleed for horses here. But even on dogs and cats, I found the same thing as some of the big hoarding cases that came in on dogs and cats. If you ask the community and you ask the veterinarians, they do come forward and they will help. AS

Resources

Dealing with a hoarder in your area? Trying to get community groups to come together to deal with the problem? The DVD *An Animal Hoarding Task Force Solution* can help you educate local officials and mental health care groups about the issue. Order online at animalsheltering.org/publications (\$9.99), and check out our resources for combating hoarding at animalsheltering.org/hoarding.

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