

PROBE INTO PET FACILITY CONTINUES MORE ABUSE CLAIMS

By Sarah L. Greenhalgh The Winchester Star December 3, 2011

Frederick County Sheriff's Deputy Megan Moreland, with the Animal Control division, is the investigating officer in the Aberdeen Acres alleged animal abuse case. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star) Frederick County Sheriff's Office Deputy Megan Moreland, with Animal Control, is investigating allegations of animal abuse at Aberdeen Acres. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star) WINCHESTER- She tries to speak for those who cannot. Deputy Megan A. Moreland of the Frederick County Sheriff's Office Animal Control Division works with victims that cannot tell her what has happened to them. She must rely on her training to determine if they are suffering from neglect or have been abused. She does this by gathering witness statements, investigating an animal's residence and by observing it. Moreland is currently assigned to the case of alleged animal cruelty involving the Aberdeen Acres Pet Care Center in Stephenson and its owner, Russell Ebersole. In her nine years on the job, she said, she has never seen as many complaints coming from a single boarding kennel or heard anything quite like the nature of the accusations against Aberdeen Acres. No charges have been filed against Ebersole or any of the staff at Aberdeen Acres. But on Nov. 21, materials at the kennel were confiscated after a search warrant was executed at the facility at 667 Walters Mill Lane. The warrant was obtained after a complaint by two former employees was filed Aug. 29 with Moreland over alleged abusive training practices in the dog-obedience program and animal cruelty at the kennel. The complaint refers to a bloodhound named Flash and an Italian mastiff named Achilles. "Originally, we had the two complaints from the former workers and the two dog owners," Moreland said Friday from her office in the Frederick County Public Safety Building. "Now we have about 13 complaints, and if you add those to some from prior years, we have about 20 so far." And Moreland - who has several large binders on her desk dedicated to just this case - does not think it is going to end there. She said the nature of the calls concern people saying that after their dogs stayed at the boarding kennel, the animals' behavior or health changed. "Some of the owners are blaming themselves for not trusting their instincts," Moreland said. "They feel bad and betrayed and like in some part they are responsible." Moreland said people are now reporting that their dogs died after being in the care of Aberdeen Acres. The dogs were allegedly taken to area veterinarians and later had to be euthanized. "About two to three of the calls are about dogs being euthanized without the owner's knowledge or consent," she said. Moreland added that the owners were allegedly not notified that a problem had occurred until they arrived to pick up their pets. Ebersole vehemently denies that this ever happened. "Never, ever, ever have we euthanized an animal at our facility," he said Friday. "The Virginia Code is crystal clear. I am required to get the best care possible. The veterinarian is required to contact the owner." In Virginia, animal abuse or cruelty is a Class I misdemeanor that usually ends up with a suspended sentence or a small fine. However, if an animal dies or is euthanized while in the care of the owner or caregiver - as a result of animal abuse or neglect - the charge becomes a Class 6 felony with a maximum of 12 months in jail and a \$2,500 fine. And in the statute, "any person convicted of violating this section may be prohibited by the court from possession or ownership of companion animals." Proving that any animals died as a direct result from injuries or neglect suffered at any facility, however, is not an easy task. "What we're looking at is a broad span of allegations," Moreland said. "It's a difficult case in that we are getting so many more calls." In September 2005, Ebersole was sentenced to 63 months in prison after being found

guilty of 25 counts of wire fraud and two counts of lying to the federal government. His business - Detector Dogs Against Drugs and Explosives, based at his Aberdeen Acres kennel - had a \$700,000 contract with the federal government to produce bomb-sniffing dogs. The animals he said were qualified to do so, however, failed to pass certification. Ebersole, who served time in the Northwestern Regional Adult Detention Center from April 30, 2005, to June 4, 2008, told The Winchester Star last week that he is being falsely accused in this latest case against him. He disputes the claims by the workers in the original complaint and insists that Flash and Achilles were not abused. "People can go to our website and Facebook page and see the videos of Flash and Achilles," Ebersole said Nov. 22. "You can see the dogs on the videos; their tails are wagging, they're happy dogs." According to its website, Aberdeen Acres is a grooming, training and boarding facility that specializes in basic obedience, agility, protection and service-dog training.

Anyone with information about this case may contact the Frederick County Sheriff's Office at 540-662-6162. - Contact Sarah L. Greenhalgh at sgreenhalgh@winchesterstar.com