

## Experts, former employees condemn operations at facility that housed killer dog

By Amy Poulter - SouthSideDaily, June 15, 2017



VIRGINIA BEACH — Two weeks after a 90-year-old-woman died after she was attacked by a dog, animal rescue organizations up and down the East Coast are searching for answers — and most of the questions circle around the rehabilitation center the dog came from.

At the center of the controversy, instead of placing blame solely on Blue, a one-year-old American pit bull terrier, and his contentious breed, many are instead pointing their fingers at Forever Home Rescue and Rehabilitation Center.

Mentioning the breed of the dog responsible for the death? It only intensifies debate and draws criticism from some.

Blue was adopted the same day the attack occurred. The dog was sent to his new home wearing an electronic collar, commonly referred to as a shock collar, so that his adopter could continue using the same method he had been trained with at Forever Home Rescue and Rehabilitation Center.

When the collar later came off, Blue's behavior changed.

Police reports indicated the fatal attack occurred around 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, May 31. The woman would later succumb to her injuries in a hospital the following morning, just three months shy of her next birthday.

A tweet from the Virginia Beach police department indicated that police had executed search warrants at properties related to the fatal attack.

Southside Daily talked to more than two dozen people — including former employees, volunteer rescuers and dog training advocates — and was granted access to several photographs and text message exchanges.

A screenshot of Blue's adoption listing on Forever Home Rescue and Rehabilitation Center's website.

"The conditions the dogs were kept in..."

While working at Forever Home, former employee Karen Reams, who provided basic care for the animals, said many of the dogs that were there for rehabilitation — what she describes as training aimed to correct bad or aggressive behaviors — rarely received the training their owners paid for. According to the organization's website, pet owners and other dog rescues pay anywhere from \$1,000 to \$4,000 to train and rehabilitate dogs.

According to Reams, it wasn't out of the ordinary for a dog to only spend about 10 to 15 minutes outside of its crate each day.

"The conditions the dogs were kept in — in rusty crates," Reams said, "they would only get walked for about five minutes in the morning and for another five minutes at night."

In a report filed in 2015 by the Animal and Food Industry Service Office of Animal Care and Emergency Response, five dog enclosures were deemed unsafe and ventilation in the building wasn't adequate for the 77 dogs housed there at the time.

Former employees Karen Reams and Aiden Nash said the dogs were often kept in less than desirable conditions and only saw a few minutes of outside time each day. (Courtesy of Aiden Nash)

Reams said the facility's owner Toni Enright and her wife, Lydia, did not spend the necessary time to work with dogs submitted to their programs.

"They didn't show up for work most days and when they did, they brought their own dogs and trained them instead," Reams said. "There was no training plan for the other dogs. They would put a shock collar on a dog and just shock them really hard."

Another former employee, Aiden Nash, said the dogs at their Norfolk training facility went through

the same training methods and treatment. Nash was a caretaker of the animals and would walk and interact with them as directed.

Training programs advertised on the website require dog owners to leave their pet at the training center for at least two weeks. Extensive training can have dogs staying for up to three months.

Like the adoption center, Nash said, the dogs were kept in less than desirable conditions and saw only minutes of sunshine each day.

Training sessions didn't go as promised for boarded dogs in Norfolk either, according to Nash, who said many dogs didn't receive any interaction until the day before they would be taken home, when the facility owners would place shock collars on the dogs.

"The owners abused the shock collars pretty badly," Nash said. "They would hold the button down for more than five seconds until the dog was just screaming at the top of its lungs."

After an aggressive dog, which Nash said hadn't been trained or worked with at all, was adopted out, Nash left the organization.

"When I started working there I was really excited to help give these dogs a second chance," Nash said. "As the weeks went by, only some dogs were being trained. Dogs that weren't being trained were being adopted out. It was too huge a risk and I couldn't do it anymore."

Nash, who is a veterinary technician now living in Tennessee, said he would also warn Enright when a dog exhibited symptoms of illness. Rarely would anything be done to help the dogs, Nash said.

On at least two occasions, when dogs at the training facility had conjunctivitis or diarrhea, Nash's requests for medical treatment went unanswered, he said.

"I saw them abuse those dogs."

Angel Harvell and her daughter, Kim Brown, worked at the Enright's facility when it was located in Knotts Island, North Carolina. Harvell said she and her daughter also lived with Enright for a period of time, and that many dogs were boarded in their home.

Harvell said at the time, she and her daughter provided around-the-clock care for many of the dogs. Because she wouldn't comply with certain methods, Harvell said she was often reprimanded.

"They would take sticks and poke at them or hit them to correct their behavior," Harvell said. "I wouldn't do it. I constantly stayed in trouble."

Brown said when a dog named Oscar broke out of his crate during a storm one night, owner Jamie Cochran, who was dating Enright at the time, hit the dog repeatedly with a metal broom handle.

"Oscar was there for a training program," Brown said. "He was afraid of the storm and Jamie hit him with the broom until it broke."

Harvell said dogs often cowered when Cochran entered the room.

In February 2015, a dog named Delbert was injured at the Virginia Beach facility. He later died

from his injuries, but Harvell said the story Enright shared with local media wasn't the truth. Harvell said she worked the morning Delbert was found injured. Her shift started at 7 a.m. When she arrived and began her morning rounds, she found Delbert lying bloodied on the floor of a room with another dog standing over him.

Worried, she said she instantly called Enright and told her that the dog needed emergency treatment. Hours later, Harvell said, Enright took the dog to a private veterinarian. She returned about 45 minutes later and said that Delbert would be fine.

The next day, his condition has worsened.

"I called Toni again and begged her to let me take him to the vet," Harvell said. "She wouldn't let me do it."

Delbert would die later that night as Harvell held him. She said she sang "Amazing Grace" to him in his last hours, sitting on the bathroom floor of the facility.

Harvell said that Enright later told other employees that Harvell had kicked Delbert in the stomach.

"It was devastating. I left because working there was like — it's so mentally and emotionally draining," Harvell said. "It's like a vacuum cleaner that sucks your soul out of you."

Nash likened many of the training methods used at the Norfolk facility to abuse, explaining that dogs would often have buckets of water poured over them before they were thrown in crates for hours.

A dog at the training facility in Norfolk defecated on its blanket. Aiden Nash said dogs were often left in this condition for hours. (Courtesy of Aiden Nash)

If they used the restroom in their crates, they would be made to stay in there even longer so they could "learn how to hold it."

"When a dog has health and urination problems, they can't help it," Nash said. "They would be left sitting in their own urine or feces for hours."

"I tried to tell them he wasn't ready..."

Blue isn't the first dog that has put the rescue and rehabilitation center in the news. A dog named McLovin was adopted out from Forever Home in May 2016. Less than an hour after McLovin went home with his new owner, he mauled a cat to death.

Reams worked at the facility at the time and said she tried to warn Enright that the dog was not ready for adoption. Her pleas to keep him in the training program were ignored, Reams said.

"He simply wasn't ready," Reams said. "McLovin had a very strong prey drive. Toni knew because he went after her own dogs."

Like others, Reams said McLovin didn't go through the rigorous training programs advertised by the facility. McLovin whined frequently, Reams said, and because of his whining, Enright didn't like him.

"She never worked with him," Reams said. "Not a single day."

As a result of the cat's death, McLovin, like Blue, was euthanized.

After working in the two locations over a span of two years, Harvell said a majority of the fees paid by owners and rescues isn't used on the animals in need of training.

"The money doesn't go to the facility," Harvell said. "We ran out of dog food frequently. They spent training and rehab fees on themselves and then asked for donations to care for the dogs."

To increase the funds coming into the organization, Harvell said they started to take on more dogs. By the end of her time with Forever Home, the facility housed as many as 100 dogs.

Crates were stacked on top of each other in every room, she said.

"All of these donations come from people that think they're helping the dogs," Harvell said. "And they're not. All they're doing is messing these dogs up more."

### Training techniques questioned

The question that remains in the wake of the June 1 tragedy is if rehabilitation for dogs is even possible.

Shelters that strive for a no-kill status say yes. Others, who are calling for pit bull advocates to adopt a "responsible rescue" mentality, say it isn't.

Peg Benoit lives in Pennsylvania and runs Mastiffs to Mutts, a rescue organization that specializes in Mastiffs and large-breed dogs.

Out of desperation, Benoit said she sent a dog named Optimus to Forever Home in 2013. She paid the \$1,500 training fee for a three-month program. Optimus was what Benoit calls "people aggressive," meaning he was protective over his human family.

"At the time, I sent him there because I didn't want to put him to sleep," Benoit said. "I was hopeful that they could help him."

Benoit said while Optimus was there, she would try to call and check on him. She requested photos and videos of his progress from Enright. Her calls and requests were ignored. Frustrated, a volunteer from her organization drove down to the Virginia Beach facility and demanded to see the dog.

"They brought him out with a shock collar and he just sat there with his head down," Benoit said.

"His spirit was totally broken. There was no light left in his eyes."

When the three-month program was up, Enright told Benoit they were unable to rehabilitate the dog and they would either have to pay another training fee or euthanize the dog.

Optimus was put to sleep shortly after.

"I would never do that again. If we get dogs in like that, we euthanize them," Benoit said. "At the time, you're desperate and think there might be some help."

Ashley Tucker has operated a dog training business for nearly 10 years. One problem with using an electronic collar, Tucker said, is that when they're used as the primary training technique, a dog will often respond in one of two ways.

Tucker, who has gone through training certifications and routinely completes continuing education

courses and attends seminars, said that though she does use the collars for some dogs, it is used much later in the training program.

"They will shut down or they will freak out," Tucker said. "If you're using it before they understand how you're trying to modify their behavior, they won't understand the sensation."

If such a collar is used as the only source of training for an aggressive dog, Tucker said, they dog will quickly learn that it can behave differently once the collar comes off.

Blue, whose collar was removed before the attack, exhibits why the collar can be problematic, according to Tucker.

"These dogs are smart," Tucker said. "I cannot reiterate enough the fact that you are doing so much harm to a dog, just by throwing an electronic collar on and cranking it up, and the relationship it has with humans."

So what choices do rescuers have for dogs that can't be rehabilitated?

"These dogs should be humanely euthanized," said Lauren Sanders, a local pit bull advocate and rescue volunteer. "I have pit bulls of my own, and most are wonderful dogs, but situations like this only make it harder for other dogs and rescues."

Sanders likens the inability to rehabilitate aggressive dogs who may suffer from a form of mental health to the treatment that dogs with physical ailments are given.

When a dog is too sick to recover, they're humanely euthanized so that they don't suffer, and Sanders said dogs with mental health issues should be treated as compassionately.

"In the rescue world, there aren't enough spots for every dog. Dogs that have minor health issues are euthanized to make room for aggressive dogs that shouldn't be adopted out to the general public," Sanders said.

What it costs to send a dog to Forever Home, Sanders said, could pay for health care for dogs that are much more suitable for adoption. But Forever Home, she said, is exploiting a sensitive market.

"So many rescues think they can save them all," Sanders said. "Forever Home realized they can make money, feeding into the emotions of desperate people who don't want their dog to die."

How can similar situations be prevented?

The biggest issue, according to Board President of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers Bradley Phifer, is that there is no legislative oversight on dog trainers and suitable training methods.

"There are no licensing requirements for dog trainers," Phifer said. "Anyone can read a book, attend a class or watch a television show and offer training services to the public."

To adopt out dogs, the problem is the same. There are no national or state level licensing requirements.

They also recommend the use of positive reinforcement over negative reinforcement.

"You should always use positive techniques to modify a dog's behavior or train new skill. If

punishment is needed, it should always be the last resort,” Phifer said. “You don’t come in and use negative reinforcement to modify behavior because it only inhibits the dog and you won’t see any change in its behavior.”

Robin Bennett, chair of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers, said that the best way to modify a dog’s negative behavior is to spend more time with it and focus on recognizing good behaviors.

“You can have a positive relationship with a dog by doing positive things,” Bennett said, “but how do you build that trust? You do that by interacting with them rather than isolating them.”

Establishing standards for training and rescue organizations could benefit all dogs, not just controversial breeds, Bennett said, because dogs who are poorly trained end up in shelters. Like Sanders said, when difficult dogs end up in shelters, it takes up a spot that could “go to a better-equipped animal.”

Legislators in New York and Florida have recently tried to pass laws to establish such standards, but none have been signed as of June.

“Because of situations like this, unfortunately, it’s becoming almost necessary that trainers are held to minimal standards at best,” Phifer said. “There’s a difference when a trainer takes the courses, passes the knowledge exam and is held to a standard or practice and ethics.”

Editor’s note: Forever Home Rescue and Rehabilitation Center repeatedly declined to comment on any of the allegations described in the story. Further, Freedom of Information Act requests filed by Southside Daily to the Norfolk and Virginia Beach police departments about calls to Forever Home’s facilities were acknowledged but responses were not received by the time this story was published. Law grants recipients of FOIA requests five days to respond plus an additional five days when requested. The Virginia Beach Police Department did not respond within the allotted time. Under the law, the Norfolk Police Department has until close of business Friday, June 16.

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