
Animal Control Department has interim director amid dissension

By David Washburn and Luis Monteagudo Jr.
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A veteran county official took over the leadership of the Animal Control Department yesterday from its embattled director, Dr. Dena Mangiamele.

Alex A. Martinez, Mangiamele's supervisor, told her Wednesday that she was being reassigned to improve the department's relationship with community groups and to hasten planned improvements, according to a memo obtained by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

Mangiamele balked at the reassignment and was subsequently placed on one week's paid administrative leave, said a county government source who didn't want to be identified because it is a personnel matter.

Mangiamele could not be reached for an interview yesterday, and county officials would not comment further on why she was placed on leave.

Her leave will last through Friday.

The memo, which was dated Wednesday, states that Mikel Haas, the county's registrar of voters, will be interim director for a minimum of six months. It said Mangiamele, who earns \$99,986 a year, would be reassigned to another "executive-level position."

The actions follow a July 1 *Union-Tribune* story about problems at the county's three animal shelters. The story revealed numerous instances of neglect and mismanagement at the shelters. Among them:

- Animals being advertised for adoption even though they had been killed.
- Department personnel killing healthy animals and describing them as "ill" and "suffering" in department records.
- Sick animals going without treatment, and some incoming animals failing to receive required vaccinations or medication.

The story also reported the Humane Society of the United States had inspected the department at the request of county officials. The society's preliminary report cited hostilities between the department and local veterinarians and animal welfare groups, and suggested the department had lost the faith of the community.

"While I take exception to the inaccuracies contained in a recent article and editorial in the *Union-Tribune*, it is apparent that DAC's relationship with several community groups must be improved," Martinez wrote in his memo to Mangiamele.

Martinez did not return reporters' calls yesterday. His boss, county Chief Administrative Officer Walt Ekard, was asked to specify the inaccuracies in an interview yesterday. He cited none, saying that the newspaper's coverage "paints the wrong picture."

The newspaper has received no requests for corrections on the story or the editorial.

Mangiamele came to San Diego in 1999 from Los Angeles, where she was chief veterinarian for that city's Department of Animal Control for four years.

Since her arrival, disagreements have grown into feuds between Mangiamele and the county's veterinarians, rescue groups and volunteers.

Those inside and outside the department contend Mangiamele has run Animal Control like a dictatorship and has alienated groups that want to help the animals at county shelters.

Chief among Mangiamele's critics are leaders of Friends of County Animal Shelters, the county's largest animal-rescue organization with more than 3,000 members.

"Before Mangiamele we had very few problems working with the staff of Animal Control, and we were saddened that they developed," said Peggy Howell, a founder of the program. "I look forward to re-establishing a good relationship with the employees of the department."

Mangiamele said in a previous interview that she was proud of the changes she had brought to the department, saying they improved animal care.

The man temporarily replacing her, Mikel Haas, is gaining a reputation for turning troubled departments around. He is considered a troubleshooter by other county officials and is especially adept at public relations.

In February, Haas was appointed interim director of the Housing and Community Development after its director was placed on administrative leave. The department was suffering through computer problems that were causing late and incorrect checks to be mailed to landlords.

Haas served about four months as interim director of that department, then went back to his registrar's job when a permanent director was found. The former director resigned.

"Mikel Haas is, in short, one of the best department heads I have and one of the best there is in dealing with employees and community issues," Ekard said.

Haas and Martinez toured the county's three Animal Control shelters yesterday and spoke to groups of

employees.

In an interview, Haas said he does not plan any immediate changes.

"I'm going to be talking to a lot of people in and out of the department as we get started with this," said Haas, who is to take over the department Monday.

"We're going to reach out and certainly talk to these groups. Certainly, the department has suffered from some very vociferous critics. The first thing I want to do is sit down and listen and find out what's what. Gosh, I think we're all working toward the same goal."

Haas, 43, has been registrar of voters for seven years and previously worked in the San Diego City Clerk's Office.