

OSPACA 'private police force', protesters charge

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Staff Writer

Protesters are calling the Ontario SPCA a "private police force" and demanding its powers be taken away due to misuse.

A group of 25 protesters gathered in front of the Ontario SPCA's head office in Whitchurch-Stouffville this month, handing out flyers stating the "government, not the humane society, should be in charge of enforcing laws to protect animals and to prosecute offenders."

One of the protesters was Richmond Hill resident Sunny Reuter who went on a 10-day vacation and put her dog, Arko, into a Schomberg boarding kennel until she returned.

The 12-1/2-year-old, rare Akbash breed was seized from the kennel during an investigation by the Ontario SPCA in 2003.

Arko was then euthanized by the organization on the order of its staff veterinarian before Ms Reuter returned.

"They said he was lame when they found him," Ms Reuter said.

"He very well could have been. He was getting older, but that is not the point."

Ms Reuter claimed Arko received a clean bill of health from a vet 90 days earlier and the dog was tagged with her vet's phone number.

To make matters worse, Ms Reuter found herself under investigation for animal cruelty.

Arko was taken to Guelph where a necropsy proved he had not been abused and was a healthy, old dog, she added.

All charges against her were dropped, but she still had questions to which no one at the Ontario SPCA would answer.

"All I want is accountability and transparency," she said.

"We removed her dog because it flat out needed medical care," Ontario SPCA executive director Mike Draper said.

"It couldn't even stand during our investigation."

The investigation was launched on Ms Reuter because investigators were

not sure if the dog's condition was caused by her or the kennel.

An order is usually written up outlining changes needed to relieve a pet's distress and given to the pet owner after an investigation.

If the orders are not followed, the animal will be seized for its own welfare.

These can be appealed to the animal care review board, Mr. Draper explained.

But in this case, medical attention was not enough to relieve Arko's distress, so the vet decided it was in best for the animal to be euthanized.

A media release headed by South Bruce Peninsula Mayor Carl Noble states protesters believe the "chronically underfunded organization has to rely on publicized animal seizures and Criminal Code charges to sustain itself."

"We raise awareness by letting people know what we are accomplishing," Mr. Draper said.

"Awareness raises funds and is a deterrent."

"Their powers need to be softened," Mr. Noble said.

"Agents and inspectors have no one to tell them they can't do this and, in many cases, if they feel they have done wrong, they drop the charges with no compensation for the owner."

The province should send an overseer to assess policies and operations and make changes, he said.

He would also like to see a government-appointed mediator assigned to protect pet owners under investigation.

It is the government that prosecutes the charges, not the Ontario SPCA and it is the Crown Attorney who drops charges, Mr. Draper said.

As for the police enforcing animal cruelty laws, they don't have the funding, manpower or desire, he said.

"If we weren't here to protect the animals, who will?" Mr. Draper asked, pointing out a few protesters is just the cost of doing business.

For information on the efforts to reform the animal cruelty act, e-mail reformanimalcrueltyact@hotmail.com. For more information about the Ontario SPCA, visit www.ospca.ca

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