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Family Outraged After CACC Finds, Then Kills, Beloved Pet

by Robert Brodsky
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A Maspeth family is furious with the Center for Animal Care and Control who found, then accidentally euthanized their beloved family pet, Cookie.

Monica Ceballos said her mother's pit bull-mix was a member of her family for over nine years and didn't deserve to die.

"It's really a nightmare," she said. Cookie was an incredible dog. And, I want to know what happened."

Cookie escaped from the family's 52nd Avenue home on Saturday, April 20th, while they were away on vacation.

Cookie had made a habit of running away in the past, prompting the family to install a tiny microchip in the dog, so that she could always be reunited, if lost, with her owners.

The following Monday, April 22nd, the Ceballos received a phone call from the CACC -- which maintains a drop-off and transfer site at 92-29 Queens Boulevard in Rego Park -- notifying them that Cookie had been found safe and was ready to be picked up

Two days later the Ceballos travelled to the CACC's Brooklyn shelter, where Cookie was being housed, expecting a happy family reunion.

However, when they arrived, they learned that a tragic mistake had been made and that Cookie had been put to sleep.

According to Doris Meyer, spokesperson for the CACC, the accident was due to human error

She said the agency has three fail-safe mechanisms in place for when a lost dog is found. CACC employees are instructed to check for the animal's kennel card, look for any identification or a microchip and to pull up the animal's file on its computer system.

However, Meyer said the person responsible for following these procedures failed to perform his duties. A 20-year employee of the city-funded agency, he has since been terminated.

"We deeply regret this incident," Meyer said. "We have a system in place, but if people don't do what is needed to be done..."

However an apology and a terminated employee does little to relieve the anger of the Ceballos family, which has spent the past two weeks in mourning.

"I'm in pain," Ceballos said. "I have headaches. And, I am angry."

The family, which is still considering filing a lawsuit, asked the CACC to pay for the cost of burying Cookie -- a request the agency has agreed to. They also offered the family a new dog -- an idea which they flatly rejected.

Ceballos said the most difficult part of this experience has been explaining to the family's young nieces and nephews why they can no longer play with Cookie. "They just don't understand."

The family is harshly critical of the number of animals that enter the CACC, which has developed a reputation every year for rushing to euthanize animals because it to house them all.

"They run the center like a business," They need a cage, so they kill for space."

She believes that Cookie should have been kept in a separate area away from all other animals whose owners have yet to be located.

Meyer disputes that logic and maintains that their system works when applied correctly.

"We are so careful," Meyer said, noting that cases such as Cookie's are "very infrequent. The system worked the last time that the dog was here and I'm very sorry that it didn't work this time."

However, some local animal activists question the CACC's sincerity.

Regina Massaro, a dog rescuer who founded Roxy's Sanctuary in Maspeth, is a frequent critic of the CACC and its methods of animal treatment, saying that the shelter's only purpose is to euthanize animals.

"People don't realize just how dangerous it is when an animal goes to the CACC," Massaro said. "They have serious issues that need to be addressed."

City regulations state that any animal found loose, which is turned over to the CACC must be kept for 10 days *[SRAC note: NYC is exempted from this State law and is allowed just 2 days]* to give its owner sufficient time to contact the shelter. However, animals surrendered by their owner can be euthanized immediately, regardless of their health or age.

According to recent statistics, 50,000 animals enter the city's shelter system each year. Approximately 80 percent are eventually euthanized.

CACC officials have long argued that their hands are tied because of an overwhelming number of animals that enter the system every year and the lack of space or funding to house them all.

City legislators passed a law over two years ago ordering that the CACC build a full-service shelter in every borough. However, little movement has been made by city officials to enforce the mandate.

In fact, the Queens transfer point only reopened its doors last month. They had been closed for over six months due to budgetary constraints.

And, if the mayor's new \$500 million contingency budget cut plan goes into effect, the Queens site, which is now open only two days a week, could be back on the chopping block.

Massaro said that this most recent incident should serve as a wake-up call to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who should appoint a watchdog agency to look over the CACC's activities. "Someone needs to see what's going on over there. They need a complete overhaul because something like this never should have happened."

However, no amount of reform will ever repair the hurt in a family torn apart by a tragic mistake.

"It's not fair," Ceballos said. "I really loved that dog. Since she couldn't speak for herself, I need to be the voice for Cookie."
