

# Pet massacres carried out in Puerto Rico

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TRUJILLO ALTO, Puerto Rico --

Back roads, gorges and garbage dumps on this tropical island are littered with the decaying carcasses of dogs and cats. An Associated Press investigation reveals why: possibly thousands of unwanted animals have been tossed off bridges, buried alive and otherwise inhumanely disposed of by taxpayer-financed animal control programs.

Witnesses who spoke with the AP said that, despite pledges to deliver adoptable strays to shelters and humanely euthanize the rest, the island's leading private animal control companies generally did neither.

News that live animals had been thrown to their deaths from a bridge reached the public last month when Animal Control Solutions, a government contractor, was accused of inhumanely killing some 80 dogs and cats seized from three housing projects in the town of Barceloneta. A half dozen survived the fall of at least 50 feet.

The AP probe, which included visits to two sites where animals were slaughtered, found the inhumane killings were far more extensive than that one incident. The AP saw and was told about a scale and brutality far beyond even what animal welfare activists suspected, stretching over the last eight years.

A \$22.5 million lawsuit against Animal Control Solutions and city officials - including those who helped round up the animals - was filed on behalf of 16 Barceloneta families whose dogs or cats were seized under rules prohibiting pets at the city projects. The animals' deaths show "a cold and depraved heart and has stirred public outrage around the whole world," the lawsuit says.

Julio Diaz, owner of Animal Control Solutions and a co-founder of another company, Pet Delivery, declined AP requests for an interview but told reporters there is no proof his company was responsible for the Barceloneta pet massacre. "We have never thrown animals off any place," he said.

A police investigation into the Barceloneta killings has not led to charges, but police Sgt. Wilbert Miranda, who heads the probe, said the information gathered so far indicates Animal Control Solutions was responsible. He declined to give details.

Maria Kortright, a lawyer involved in the suit, said it's clear the pets Animal Control Solutions removed from Barceloneta were the same ones hurled off the bridge because the survivors have been identified by their owners.

"Last Tuesday, I saw one of the survivors back at its home," Kortright said.

Animal welfare activists have complained to government agencies for years about allegations of improper disposal of animals, but say officials didn't act. Preventive action also is almost nonexistent: Puerto Rico has at least 100,000 stray dogs and cats - and no island-wide spaying or neutering programs.

Activist Alfredo Figueroa said the animal disposal companies acted with impunity because government agencies ignored allegations of cruelty, rather than investigate the companies or address the overpopulation of strays.

"There is apathy," Figueroa said. "No one wants to take responsibility."

A former employee of one of Diaz's companies told the AP that the firms rounded up thousands of animals over the years, brutally killed many of them and discarded the corpses wherever it was convenient. One of the former employees led the AP to two different killing fields and he and another former employee described a third.

"Not a single animal was turned over to a shelter," a former dogcatcher for Animal Control Solutions told the AP. Both he and an ex-employee of Pet Delivery, who was interviewed separately, spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. Both said they left the animal disposal jobs voluntarily.

The AP contacted all eight animal shelters and sanctuaries across Puerto Rico, and they confirmed that none had received animals for potential adoption from Diaz's companies.

Diaz co-founded Pet Delivery in 1999 and created Animal Control Solutions in 2002. Pet Delivery appears to be defunct, having reported no earnings since 2004. Facing little competition, the companies had 85 contracts with municipalities and other clients worth \$1.1 million in the past eight years, according to the Puerto Rican comptroller's office.

The AP could find no sign that any of the municipalities checked to make sure the companies dealt with the strays humanely.

"It wasn't our responsibility," said Edwin Arroyo, special assistant to the mayor of Barceloneta, which paid Animal Control Solutions up to \$20,000 per year and in October hired the company to remove banned pets from housing projects - allegedly the ones that wound up at the bottom of the bridge.

The pet disposal scandal adds to Puerto Rico's poor reputation for treatment of animals. Cockfighting is legal, with matches shown on television. One of the island's beaches is known as Dead Dog Beach - a place where teenagers drive over live puppies sealed in bags or cruelly kill them with machetes and arrows, according to animal welfare groups that photographed the atrocities.

Figueroa says he met Diaz in 1999 and introduced him to city officials in Fajardo. The city then awarded Pet Delivery a contract to remove strays. But Figueroa said he later learned that Diaz's company also was removing pets with collars and ID tags, and dumping their bodies in a field.

"Crying children, old people, a sick woman were all calling us, thinking we were involved," Figueroa said.

A former Animal Control Solutions employee told the AP that he witnessed another worker in 2005 dragging 12 to 15 small dogs out of a van along a road outside San Juan. Normally, workers injected animals with a euthanasia drug but on this day there was none. The animals were instead given an overdose of a sedative and flung 50 feet into a

trash-filled gully. Some of the dogs were alive as they crashed on top of junked beds, bottles and other garbage.

"I could hear some of the dogs whimpering as they hit the tree branches and then the ground," the former employee said as he stood with AP journalists in the muck at the site, which still holds the stench of death.

Not all the dogs died, however. A dog that was not a stray, but a sickly pet whose owner wanted it euthanized, managed to limp home. The angry owner telephoned the company and demanded it retrieve the dog and do the job right, the former employee recalled.

The former employee also showed AP reporters a highway rest stop near a gorge outside the town of Cayey where, he said, workers would inject dogs. At the edge of the gorge lay the skeletal remains of more than a dozen dogs amid matted fur and two dog collars with no tags.

Asked if the number of dogs and cats killed by Animal Control Solutions was in the hundreds, the former employee shook his head.

"It is in the thousands," he said. "On a good month, we would pick up 900."

One dog, stuffed in a sack, was found recently at the Cayey site among other bagged carcasses. It apparently survived the fall and managed to poke its head out of the bag before dying, said Carmen Cintron, who runs an animal shelter.

"I am having nightmares when I think about what that poor dog went through before it died," Cintron said.

Until 2003, Pet Delivery ran a shelter where workers injected strays, often not knowing what the drugs were or their proper doses, the former employee of that company told the AP.

Some animals were adopted from the shelter, but others - including puppies and kittens - were euthanized, the ex-employee said. Euthanizing animals that cannot be adopted is standard practice in pet shelters, but the former employee said animals at Pet Delivery's shelter were inhumanely killed.

"Any available employee at that moment would use the drug that was available and they were thrown half dead into a hole, and that's why there were some live dogs among them," he said. "What he (Diaz) had us do was to throw dirt on top of the live dogs along with the dead ones, so they all would die."