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## Embattled ASPCA veterinarian resigns over carriage horse death

By Rachael Whitcomb

*Dr. Pamela Corey talks about the lessons learned from a very public event*

**JERICHO, N.Y.** — A veterinarian who was suspended by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) after clarifying her comments about the death of a New York City carriage horse resigned from her post as the group's director of equine veterinary services for the Humane Law Enforcement Department.

Dr. Pamela Corey, speaking exclusively to *DVM Newsmagazine*, says she didn't want to resign the post she held since 2008, but was left with few options after being asked to sign a severance agreement that would have prevented her from working on or speaking about her work in equine welfare.

"It appears that the ASPCA wanted to censor or limit what I can say about my professional experiences in the ASPCA role, or even the broader issues of horse welfare that the job touched on. The agreement was so restrictive that I felt I would have to abandon my special interest and expertise in equine welfare," says Corey, who worked as an independent contractor specializing in equine welfare for years before joining ASPCA in 2008. The "gag order" wasn't limited to the case linked to her suspension, but any equine welfare work she has done or would ever do, she says.

"It wouldn't really have allowed me to work in equine welfare," she explains. "The severance agreement would have lasted forever."

Bret Hopman, a spokesperson for ASPCA, confirmed Corey's resignation, but says the organization would not offer additional comments on a personnel matter. In regard to ASPCA's role in enforcing regulations while at the same time lobbying for legislative change, Hopman says, "the ASPCA has voluntarily performed carriage horse enforcement for decades. We have done so with integrity and professionalism. Remaining steadfast to this commitment, our carriage horse enforcement work has been carried out with objectivity and fairness and always within the bounds of applicable law."

Corey says her resignation Jan. 30 came after three months on unpaid suspension related to the October death of Charlie, a New York City carriage horse. Following Charlie's death, ASPCA released a statement that included medical comments from Corey. After the release of the statement, which implied that the dead horse had been forced to work with painful maladies, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene—which licenses New York City's horse carriages—contacted ASPCA for more information about the case. Corey says ASPCA had her correction in-hand, but declined to make any new statements. When she heard the health department was looking for more information, Corey sent over a revised statement on Nov. 3. She was suspended without pay by ASPCA the same day.

Her suspension sparked a media frenzy, making Corey an unwilling "spokesperson" for pro-carriage horse groups. Even the Teamsters called for her reinstatement.

During the uproar, Corey said nothing to the mainstream media, adding she was surprised and embarrassed to see her picture on the front of *The New York Times* and local broadcasts.

"I wasn't looking to grandstand. I certainly didn't want to be in the spotlight," Corey says. "Everybody who knows me knows I'm very quiet and try to communicate to horse owners and veterinarians in a very professional manner and don't like to make statements without being sure of them. I was upset and unhappy to be on the news and have all of these press calls coming in to me."

Corey says she was worried about how the veterinary community would view her, and wanted to make sure another veterinarian wouldn't end up in her position without understanding what happened from her point of view.

Corey says she only wanted to remain objective in her clarification of ASPCA's original statement, and that she felt as though she was being used as a tool to make a larger political statement in relation to ASPCA's lobbying efforts to get carriage horses banned.

"I'm supposed to be objective in the humane law enforcement department and as a veterinarian. I'm very concerned that a veterinarian was put in this position," she says. "I certainly have never wanted to be out there saying bad things about anyone. The reason for the clarification was to maintain my objectivity and do the right thing."

The veterinary community and her clients have been supportive throughout the ordeal, Corey says.

"It's been very stressful and the saving grace is that my horse community and my veterinary friends are very much behind me and understand," Corey says, adding she had even gone as far as to register a complaint with the New York Attorney General's Office over the way the whole ordeal unfolded.

During the three months of her suspension, Corey says she wasn't given a reason for the disciplinary action and received very little communication. After her attorney pressed the organization, Corey says she was told she was legally suspended for "serious misconduct," but never explained what policy she broke.

In the end, Corey says she was given the option to sign an agreement that would have given her a small severance package but forbidden her from ever working in or speaking about equine welfare again, or resigning.

"My interest in welfare predated that job, and I really didn't want to lose that," Corey says. "I couldn't sign away my ability to continue working to improve the lives of working horses in NYC and speak out about those issues."

Corey hopes other veterinarians will see her experience and learn from it, understanding that when you work

for organizations like humane groups, you may be put in a position to push an agenda rather than remain an objective medical expert.

"I guess for awhile I felt that I was maintaining my objectivity in my department until this crisis occurred. Then it became clear, I couldn't do that," she says.

Her advice to others in advocacy roles is to stick to the facts and maintain scientific objectivity.

Corey is now working as a solo practitioner in private equine practice.

She is in a good place now and happy to have the ordeal behind her.

"It's been a real lesson learned," she says. "I didn't sign my life away. I think I have a lot to say, and I think I've really helped get a lot of the agencies that work together to come together to help horses more... All of the attention on (the carriage horses) has resulted in improvements for them."



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