

New Bethlehem woman sentenced for charges tied to multiple deceased animals

Release: Keri Beth Wolfe, 45, sentenced to term of incarceration of one to five years in a state correctional facility

By A.J. PANIAN Managing Editor



Body bags are pictured outside of the home of Keri Beth Wolfe of New Bethlehem, who was sentenced Tuesday in the Armstrong County Court of Common Pleas for her recent conviction on charges related to cruelty to animal charges that occurred in the months leading up to March of 2021.

- Photos: Submitted



One of the abused animals, a dog named Patrick, is pictured when found at the home. At the time, Patrick, at a body condition score of “1,” the lowest score a dog can be given, according to Armstrong County Humane Officer Chris O’Donnell. Dr. Becky Morrow of Frankie’s Friends Cat Rescue said Patrick would not have survived another 24 hours. He was so weak O’Donnell had to carry him into the shelter.



Patrick pictured today, as he waits for a home. Patrick is available for adoption through OOTS. Anyone interested can call 724-548-4520.

Armstrong County District Attorney Katie Charlton on Tuesday announced the sentencing of Keri Beth Wolfe of New Bethlehem, relating to cruelty to animal charges that occurred in the months leading up to March of 2021, according to a press release issued yesterday by DA Charlton's office.

Wolfe was charged with numerous counts of felony aggravated cruelty to animals along with numerous misdemeanor cruelty to animal and neglect of animal charges by Armstrong County Humane Police Officer Chris Jirak O'Donnell, the release states.

Wolfe was sentenced by the Hon. President Judge James Panchik in the county Court of Common Pleas of Armstrong County, the release states.

During sentencing, Judge Panchik acknowledged photographs and details of the search warrant submitted by Officer O'Donnell, which indicated that upon a search of Wolfe's property, 23 deceased animals were found including five dogs, five cats, seven rabbits, five birds and a pot-bellied pig, the release states.

Necropsies performed on the animals indicated that they had died of starvation, with some of the animals recently passing and others having been deceased for some time prior to the execution of the warrant, the release states.

O'Donnell noted that there was no water or food available for any of the animals, the release states.

In accordance with a plea agreement reached in the case, Judge Panchik sentenced Ms. Wolfe to a term of incarceration of one to five years in a state correctional facility and denied Ms. Wolfe's request for house arrest in accordance with the District Attorney's and the probation department's rejection of Ms. Wolfe's house arrest application, the release states.

Judge Panchik additionally ordered that Ms. Wolfe was prohibited from owning any animals, the release states.

District Attorney Charlton said she was very pleased with the sentence, the release states.

"Confinement in the Department of Corrections is appropriate in this case given the egregiousness of the conduct involved," Charlton stated in the release. "This is by the far the worst animal cruelty case that I have seen in my career. I hope this sends a strong message to those wanting to mistreat, neglect and abuse innocent animals that such conduct will not be tolerated in Armstrong County."

In addition, Charlton praised the work of O'Donnell.

“Officer O'Donnell has been an asset to this county and she worked very hard on this case from the outset. Her hard work and dedication led to this conviction. More importantly, animals were saved because of Officer O'Donnell's thorough investigation,” she said. “Officer O'Donnell's dedication to animals and to seeing this case through was truly remarkable and both the citizens and animals of Armstrong County are fortunate to have her as a humane officer.”

In a separate statement issued yesterday in response to the sentencing decision issued by O'Donnell, an official of Humane Animal Allies, representing Orphans of the Storm, a no-kill animal shelter based in Rayburn Township, she noted:

“I thank the Honorable Judge Panchik for his fair sentencing of Keri Wolfe. It is clear that animal cruelty will not be tolerated in Armstrong County. I hope that Ms. Wolfe gets the help she needs and will not neglect or abuse animals in the future. This outcome was only possible through the team efforts of Dr. Becky Morrow and the Frankie's Friends Cat Rescue staff, Humane Officer Debbie Urmann, Bethann Galbraith of Orphans of the Storm, Troopers Weitzel and Ray of the Pennsylvania State Police Kittanning barracks, and District Attorney Katie Charlton. It was truly my honor to serve with this outstanding group of individuals to see justice for these animals.”

O'Donnell recently founded a nonprofit organization, Humane Animal Allies, to support the work of the county's two volunteer humane police officers. Information may be found at: humaneanimalallies.org.

CASE BACKGROUND

In June of 2021 the charges filed against Wolfe, 45, were held over for trial in the county common pleas court during a preliminary hearing at the office of Rural Valley Magisterial District Judge Kevin McCausland.

The information on the reported incident was made available in a criminal complaint, in conjunction with an affidavit of probable cause written by O'Donnell.

According to the affidavit, on March 22, 2021, O'Donnell, Pennsylvania State Police (PSP), Humane Officer Deb Urmann, Dr. Becky Morrow, and an assistant from Frankie's Friends searched 230 Bingham Road, in Madison Township, which is owned by Wolfe.

Upon arriving at the scene, O'Donnell said they found six deceased birds located in cages at the back of the house, with no water or food, and a large amount of feces, court papers state.

According to the affidavit, upon entering the home, they found seven deceased dogs, five deceased rabbits, and three deceased felines, with two of the deceased dogs found in one crate. O'Donnell said skeletal remains of one dog were found in the hallway, which had been eaten by other animals inside the house; one dog was found deceased in a chair; two cats were found deceased in the basement lying together with mold growing on their bodies; three rabbits were found in a tote on the kitchen counter; and one kitten was decomposing in the hallway on top of a black box, court papers state.

According to the affidavit, mobility in the house was difficult due to the "extreme" amount of trash throughout; there were overflowing litter boxes throughout the house; a large amount of feces; a foul smell of decay; some of the animals appeared to be recently deceased, with others deceased for some time; and there was no water or food available for the animals, with unopened wet dog food located in the kitchen.

O'Donnell said there were cats and three dogs that were still alive, with the dogs having low body scores, court papers state.

According to the affidavit, one dog was weak and had difficulty walking, and another dog had numerous sores on his body.

Numerous cats and two dogs were transported to a rescue, while several cats and one small dog still remain at the home.

More than 50% of the animals found on her property were deceased: out of 43 animals, 23 were found dead, O'Donnell noted.

Wolfe surrendered ownership of all surviving animals, according to DA Charlton.

Dogs remain without homes

One of the two dogs recovered living from Wolfe's property remains in need of a home.

Patrick is available for adoption through OOTS. Anyone interested can call 724-548-4520.