

# The case of Piper the cat's free X-rays and her owner, the county's shelter director

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Bronwyn Stanford was a month into her \$198,000-a-year job as director of the Animal Services Department when she allegedly brought her out-of-sorts cat, Piper, to a Miami-Dade County veterinarian for an exam that included X-rays.

That free pet service in December 2021 violated county rules according to a report issued this week

by the Inspector General's Office that found scattered instances of Stanford receiving special treatment at the county's tax-funded pet shelter in Doral.

The investigation was sparked by an anonymous complaint about Stanford and her stormy 20-month tenure that's now mired in a slander suit. She was placed on paid leave last month by her boss, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, for undisclosed reasons.

In her response to in-

vestigators, Stanford noted she either paid for services cited in the report, was rebuffed when trying to pay, or in the case of the X-ray early in her tenure, wrongly thought the service was available to any pet owner at the Doral shelter.

She blamed the whistleblower investigation on disgruntled administrators — including the vet who treated Piper — upset with her reform efforts.

"The complainant and each of the witnesses has

repeatedly, on multiple occasions, challenged my requests and even my directives," Stanford wrote in an undated memo to the Inspector General's Office.

It included an attachment titled "Witness Colusion" that included her claiming to hear laughter from an Animal Services administrator's office where she saw multiple subordinates seemingly celebrating what was then

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An X-ray taken at a county clinic of Piper, a cat belonging to Bronwyn Stanford, director of Animal Services for Miami-Dade. An Inspector General report found the free pet care violated county rules. Stanford, suspended since July for undisclosed reasons, denied the finding.

# PIPER THE CAT

an ongoing investigation.

"We got her, we got her," Stanford recalled hearing from the office. "She is going down."

Levine Cava's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Friday. Stanford also did not respond to a request for comment.

In the report, the chief veterinarian for Animal Services, Maria Serrano, said her new boss, Stanford, arrived at work one day with a short-haired black cat named Piper. Stanford, a lawyer and former administrator in Florida's child-welfare system, told Serrano that Piper "is not herself," the report said.

Serrano wrote she suggested Stanford take the cat to a private vet since X-rays "are not a service provided to the general public," according to the report. The director "insisted she would but was busy if we would just take a look," Serrano wrote in a log entry included in the report.

Later that morning, Stanford texted another administrator under her, clinic coordinator Meredith Hippert, with a question: "Anything on Piper?" Hippert texted back images of the four X-rays performed on Piper with county equipment.

More than a year later, Hippert also said Stanford asked Animal Services medical staff for help with a skin condition on Parker, a chihuahua she adopted

from a private dog sanctuary after becoming director. "The requests for diagnosis became more intense," Hippert said, according to the report, and "made the veterinary team uncomfortable."

While the shelter does provide the test to the public in some circumstances, Miami-Dade policy exempts Animal Services employees from the service, the report said.

After the test, texts show Stanford asked how she could cover the cost. "Hey I do want to pay for the test," Stanford texted Alejandra Duran, a county veterinarian, on Feb. 14. "Absolutely not," Duran responded, saying there's no cost associated with the service when provided to the public. Duran added: "We are not allowed to do it for employees."

After investigators asked Stanford about the service, she paid \$22 to Animal Services for the pet care, according to a receipt in the report.

The report also faulted Stanford for having Animal Services staff provide a \$40 spay procedure for Parker, a service available to both the public and department employees. But the shelter routinely turns people away as demand for spay and neuter treatment exceeds capacity. On Friday, for instance, there were no online appointments available at the Doral shelter.

While Stanford paid for the procedure, the report said she should have made an appointment through the regular process at the busy shelter instead of asking employees directly for the treatment.

In her response, Stanford noted she routinely pays hundreds of dollars for medical bills for her dog and 10 cats, as well as for the 16 cats she's temporarily taken in as fosters under an Animal Services program that has volunteers house homeless pets for brief periods of time.

"The complaints against me are false and misleading," she wrote.

The report's release comes a month after Levine Cava replaced Stanford with an interim director, Annette Jose, a department veteran whose

name does not come up in the Inspector General document. Levine Cava has not said why she put Stanford on paid administrative leave "until further notice" on July 14.

County lawyers also said they would not represent Stanford in the slander lawsuit filed June 22 by shelter benefactor Yolanda Berkowitz, a national Humane Society board member who had a falling out with Stanford shortly after Levine Cava appointed her to the position.

The suit claims Stanford tried to undermine Berkowitz's volunteer efforts by fabricated stories about her past, including that she was once a sex worker.

On Friday, Berkowitz lawyer Hank Adorno said



Bronwyn Stanford is Miami-Dade's Animal Services director.

in a statement that the latest report "makes it clear the shelter needs a permanent change of leadership."

"My client tried to sound the alarm in a professional way early on and paid dearly for it," he said.

"The only consolation will be if the shelter gets the leadership and relief it desperately needs."

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