



Have a Heart

Hidden cameras catch animal cruelty, help establish new statewide procedures

It's heart wrenching to put a beloved pet to sleep, but what eases some of the pain is the knowledge that it's done in a peaceful and painless way. However, for the innocent animals at Sumner County Animal Shelter, some did not meet their end in this dignified way.

A group of concerned citizens, suspicious of animal abuse taking place at the Sumner County Animal Shelter in Gallatin, Tenn., contacted private investigator Mitch Davis of TSCM Group of Nashville, Tenn., for help. Upon Davis' preliminary surveillance, he witnessed a steady stream of wheelbarrows full of dead animals being carted to an incinerator. "A normal euthanasia procedure takes about 10 minutes, and once I did the math, I calculated the vet was euthanizing one animal every minute or so," Davis said.

Taking Action

Realizing something was terribly wrong, Davis obtained permission from county officials to access the shelter and install hidden video equipment to investigate any wrongdoing. He then contacted KJB Security Products, a wholesale distributor of spy and surveillance equipment, for product recommendations. The company put him in touch with state-of-the-art hidden surveillance equipment, the SleuthGear Recluse, and materials to construct an ordinary-looking cup with a camera and DVR inside.

"Professionally and personally, I felt it wasn't right, so we needed to go in and investigate," Davis said. "We had one shot to do it, so we opted for the best equipment we could find."

The SleuthGear Recluse looks like an inconspicuous black box, but it is an all-inclusive recording device that includes a DVR and camera that easily blends into any background.

The motion-activated CMOS camera and recording system uses an 8 GB SD card for storage. Without proprietary software, the video can be exported and viewed using Windows Media player. Most importantly, with the original video maintained on the SD card, courts will accept the video as evidence.

The color camera offers a low lux rating, a JPEG resolution of 640x480 at up to 5 frames per second, video resolution of 320x240, a 75-degree view and a rechargeable lithium polymer battery that powers the device for approximately six hours of continuous recording. Another useful feature is an additional 12-volt power jack.

"If you don't like the camera that's in there, you can hook up an external camera and provide it with power from the Recluse," Davis said. "When it comes to covert video work, the biggest challenge is powering devices. The Recluse addresses that by offering an additional 12-volt power jack."

With its easy-to-operate onscreen menu, Davis was able to quickly train a former employee of the shelter to set up and plant the system inside the facility.

Caught in the Act

Shortly after setup, the cameras captured video evidence showing Dr. Bill Baber, the contract veterinarian, clearly engaging in practices defined as illegal. Baber was seen loading hyperdermic needles with sodium penabarbital and injecting unsedated animals in the heart, a method called intracardial euthanasia, or heart shot. Tennessee law states the intracardial method may only be used on heavily sedated, anesthetized or comatose animals. Intracardial injections induce an instant heart attack, and without sedatives, are a painful method of dying.

The video showed animals that had been set back down after the injection, stagger-

ing, walking in circles, falling over and dying. Sometimes in haste, insufficient amounts of sodium penabarbital were given, which led to the animals' prolonged suffering before death, or Baber would miss heart completely and inject the drug into the lungs, which produced a drowning effect. Davis' initial calculations were accurate—the video showed animals brought in as frequently as once a minute. In one day, 60 animals were improperly euthanized.


New Laws and Guidelines

Baber pleaded guilty to 12 misdemeanor charges, including animal cruelty. As part of a plea agreement, Baber did not serve any jail time, but he paid a \$5,000 fine and served 200 hours of community service. He regained his license in April 2008.

"We needed good, clear documentation of this activity to end it and get prosecution, and we got both," Davis said.

"The SleuthGear Recluse played a pivotal roll in this undercover case because of its unique ability to blend into any environment," said Jill Johnston, president of KJB Security. "Because it's virtually unnoticeable, the target never suspected the item and was caught in the act and prosecuted."

The video evidence was instrumental in bringing to light how animals were put to death in shelters and helped establish new procedures for euthanizing shelter animals humanely across the state.

As a direct result from this case, a new law clearly states that animal control or shelter workers in Tennessee must sedate animals before performing intracardial euthanasia. Another law requires state licensing boards to inform members whenever there is a change in the law. 

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