

LOCAL

## Riverside County animal services director moved amid lawsuit over kill rates at shelters

*County does not confirm connection between lawsuit, change of position*



**Sam Morgen**

Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 4:07 p.m. PT Sept. 6, 2024 | Updated 4:09 p.m. PT Sept. 6, 2024

Riverside County Director of Animal Services Erin Gettis will leave her position later this month to become the executive director of the Riverside University Health System Medical Center.

The move comes amidst a lawsuit against Gettis and the county's animal services department by four local residents angered over what they describe as high euthanasia rates and mismanagement. The lawsuit's first demand was the removal of Gettis, who the litigants characterized as unfit for her position.

"That was our first demand to the court, that she be removed, and 15 days after filing the legal action she has been removed, so that's a major victory," said lead attorney of the lawsuit Dan Bolton.

There is no evidence that the county removed Gettis from her position.

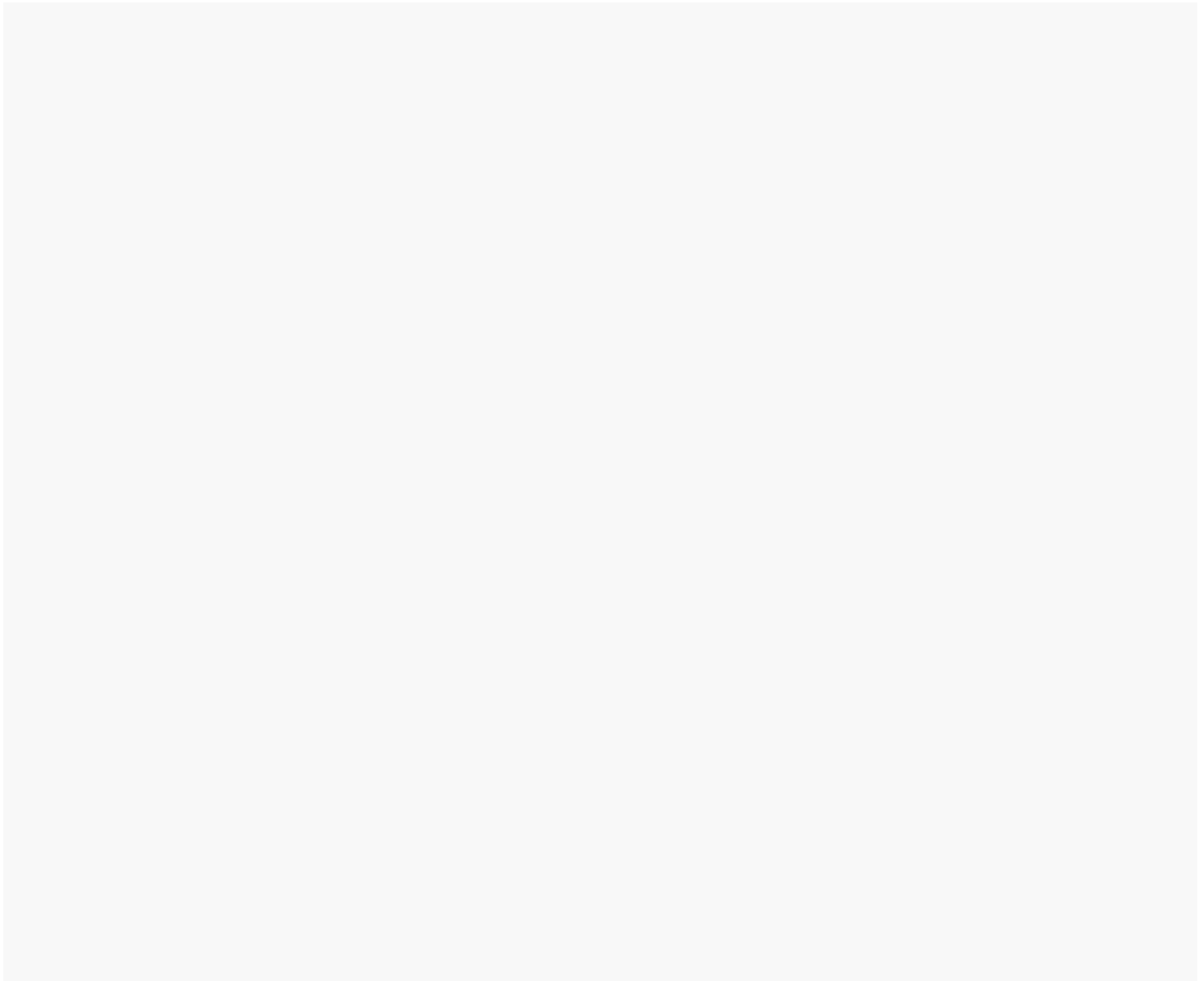
The county's messaging around Gettis' new job does not mention the lawsuit, and County CEO Jeff Van Wagenen was overwhelmingly positive in a statement sent to The Desert Sun regarding Gettis' time at the Animal Services Department. He said Gettis had overseen efforts to improve

facilities, increase community access to veterinary care and reduce animals entering the shelter, among other accomplishments.

Still, Bolton said he didn't think it was a coincidence that Gettis was changing positions within the county so quickly after the lawsuit was filed.

"It's being framed as some kind of promotional opportunity, which I think is spin by the county," he added.

According to county data, nearly half of cats and about one of every five dogs died in the shelter system from January to May of this year. The county euthanized 2,965 dogs from January to July of this year, although some of those were either requested by the owner or occurred because the dog was considered untreatable.



Litigants cited a 2023 report by the nonprofit animal welfare organization Best Friends Animal Society claiming Riverside County killed more animals than any other reporting shelter. The county has called the report inaccurate.

The county will use an external recruiting firm to conduct a nationwide search for the next director, Van Wagenen said. In the meantime, Assistant Director Kim Youngberg will serve as interim director.

Van Wagenen added that an ad hoc committee is overseeing improvements to the department and is addressing concerns raised among the community. He said the committee will take action in the coming weeks to engage with stakeholders.

The lawsuit against the county will continue as the animal advocates hope to enact systemic changes at the county's animal services department, including improving access by rescue organizations and better treatment of the animals held in the shelter.

*Sam Morgen covers the city of Palm Springs for The Desert Sun. Reach him at [smorgen@gannett.com](mailto:smorgen@gannett.com).*

