



*A dog with an open wound crouches in a corner during an investigation of an animal hoarding situation in Blountsville. Photo courtesy of Blount County Sheriff's Office.*

## Charges filed in Blountsville dog hoarding case

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Published in the Blount Countian

Apr. 9, 2025, updated June 7 and June 20

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The [Blount County Sheriff's Office](#) has filed animal cruelty charges in the Blountsville hoarding situation from which 43 dogs were removed in February, and additional information has been shared by authorities involved with the case.

The two owners of the Blountsville property have each been charged with two felony counts and 41 misdemeanor counts of animal cruelty, according to Sgt. Jason Paul, information officer at the Sheriff's Office.

The 43 charges correspond with the 43 dogs, of whom 1 was found deceased, 31 were euthanized, 9 went to rescue organizations, and 2 are available for adoption from the [Animal Adoption Center of Blount County](#), according to Karen Startley, shelter director.

The 31 euthanized dogs were affected by a range of health problems, Startley said. "A few had neurological issues and some appeared to have hip issues because they were overweight and [had] no muscle mass from being kept in a pen," Startley explained. "Most that were euthanized had multiple issues along with being raised with little to no human interaction."

"Almost every dog was suffering from mange and severe malnutrition," according to the [Mar. 21 Sheriff's Office press release](#), which also mentioned open wounds and other skin conditions, a lack of clean drinking water, and poor living conditions such as standing water and "more than 12 inches of feces."

The severe malnutrition included both underweight and overweight dogs, according to those who interacted with the animals. Sgt. Paul stated that penned dogs "were given bags of food with a cut down the center," which led to obesity in some dogs and insufficient food for those who had health issues or were unable to compete for food.

Animal Control Officer Dep. Brock Echols discovered the Blountsville situation in response to a neighbor's concern about the dogs at the Sawmill Road residence, Sgt. Paul stated. The majority of the 43 dogs were found inside the house; others were loose outside and another 10 were in pens or cages. The owners reside in a neighboring county, according to the press release.

"They had no real idea they were hurting the animals," Sgt. Paul said. "They believed they were helping them."

Delusional beliefs about helping the animals that are actually being harmed is one of the three criteria for animal hoarding, also called Noah's Syndrome, [as defined by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium](#) (HARC). The other two criteria are having more than the typical number of companion animals and failing to sufficiently care for those animals.

“Hoarding disorder may affect 2–5% of the adult population, or a minimum of five million individuals in the U.S.,” according to the National Link Coalition. “In terms of the number of animals affected and the degree and duration of their suffering, hoarding is the number one animal cruelty crisis facing companion animals in communities throughout the country,” per the Animal Legal Defense Fund, which estimates that up to 250,000 animals per year are victims of hoarding.

In a common pattern, caretaker(s) may initially be able to care for the animals, but the situation spirals out of control due to challenges such as the loss of a job or the death of a loved one, according to HARC and other experts. Missed spay and neuter appointments for a small number of pets or a litter, for example, can result in 30, 40, 50 or more animals within a matter of weeks or months. From there the situation only worsens, according to researchers, due to overwhelm and, often, self-imposed or externally-imposed shame, as evidenced by numerous condemnatory Facebook comments in response to the Blountsville case.

Some of the Blountsville dogs had been sterilized, per Startley, suggesting initial care, but there were also five puppies of whom the owners were unaware until they opened the home for Dep. Echols, according to the press release. There was no indication that the owners were selling dogs, Sgt. Paul said.

Although these owners were residing elsewhere, in a typical hoarding situation the devastation extends beyond the animals to the human residents of the home – including neglect of the caretaker, children, and dependent adults – and to the home itself. “Frequently, the shared human and animal living spaces are so filthy and full of trash they are deemed uninhabitable,” explained HARC founder Gary J. Patronek, VMD, PhD.

“The accumulation of large numbers of animals in human living spaces can have important public health implications,” Patronek wrote in another study, “including placing neighborhoods at risk,” such as of noxious ammonia levels and zoonotic disease.

Impacts to the larger community include the costs of investigation and prosecution, medical treatment, sheltering, and rescue. Charging the crimes under Alabama’s Pet Protection Act (Ala. Code §§ 13A-11-240–247), as Dep. Echols did, significantly reduces impacts on the affected animals and on the shelter by requiring a swift custody order. In comparison, when cruelty is charged according to the state’s older cruelty statute, surviving dogs and cats can become victims of the legal system, held for an extended time and often with no resolution for the substantial cost of care.

Animal hoarding is included in the DSM-5, the psychiatric diagnosis guide, as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, and effective intervention requires a multifaceted

strategy. “Without a long-term plan and support for the hoarder,” explained a Humane Society of the United States report, “the available evidence indicates that recidivism approaches 100%.”

The Animal Legal Defense Fund urges that “convicted hoarders should be barred from owning, possessing, or having any direct contact with animals.” A criminal charge is essential since only with a conviction can a judge order a possession ban and frequent surprise visits from law enforcement to ensure that the order is followed.

The Blountsville owners asked to keep some of the dogs, said Sgt. Paul, but were not allowed to do so. “After being explained the seriousness of the issue and the lack of care the dogs received,” Sgt. Paul stated, “the owners began to understand that they were hurting them, not helping, and showed some signs of remorse.” Authorities in the neighboring county are investigating the safety of animals being kept in the home of record, Sgt. Paul added.

Hoarding situations are usually discovered via a report, such as from a neighbor, family member, delivery driver, home health worker, or emergency personnel. Red flags can include a refusal to allow entrance to the home, continued acquisition or breeding, failing to properly care for animals, denial of a problem, or turning down offers of help.

“Heartbreaking scenes like these must be avoided,” urged the Sheriff’s Office press release. “It is inhumane to allow dogs to merely exist; they require care and nurturing to ensure their health and well-being.”

Blount County residents can help by recognizing the signs of hoarding and by reporting without delay to Blount County Dispatch, 205-625-4913.

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Update, June 7, 2025: The third paragraph above originally read, “The 43 charges correspond with the 43 dogs, of whom 31 were euthanized, 10 went to rescue organizations, and two are available for adoption from the Animal Adoption Center of Blount County, according to Karen Startley, shelter director.” Court documents, obtained later, showed that one of the dogs was found deceased. Because Karen had estimated the number of dogs that went to rescue organizations, I subtracted one from the rescue number to account for the deceased dog.

Update, June 20, 2025: The owners pled guilty in an agreement that included what is, by all accounts, Blount County’s first pet possession ban.