

LOCAL

# Social media battles complicate seizure of Minnesota horses

After horses seized, owner pushes back on social media; investigators must keep mum

By John Reinan (<https://www.startribune.com/john-reinan/6370583/>) Star Tribune |

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SLEEPY EYE, MINN. — When sheriff's deputies took Candi Lemarr's horses from her, she knew just where to turn: social media.

On Nov. 23, Brown County authorities seized seven horses, three donkeys and a pony from Sapphire Equestrian Farm near this south-central Minnesota city, where Lemarr raises thoroughbreds, runs a riding school and trains high school and middle school riding teams. Official files give few details on why the horses were seized, simply stating that there was a complaint of some animals being underfed and malnourished.

Within days, Lemarr was making her case on Facebook and other social media platforms, claiming the seizure was unjustified and seeking support to get her animals back.

"A huge piece of the family's hearts are missing as they weren't 'just horses,' they were our partners in our business," reads a posting on the Sapphire Farm Facebook page. Meanwhile, Lemarr filed a petition in Brown County District Court to have the animals returned.

As word of her situation spread, others joined in, sending Lemarr's message across the internet. Facebook users shared Lemarr's posts hundreds of times, with commenters calling the seizure "sinister" and "a setup."

Some compared her situation to the movie "The Stand at Paxton County" (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8362228/>), in which a shady sheriff tries to destroy a rancher by taking his livestock.

As it has in so many areas of 21st-century life, social media has changed the playing field in humane animal seizures. While the number of seizures in Minnesota has remained relatively stable, animal advocates say that the rise of social media has made their jobs tougher and more dangerous — offering accused animal owners a platform for their cases, while those seeking to enforce humane protection laws must remain silent.

"Social media involvement can complicate any case that is still in the process of being investigated or litigated before the factual evidence can be released," said Elisa Johnson, executive director of the Minnesota Federated Humane Societies, which is authorized by the Legislature to assist law enforcement in enforcing the state's animal humane laws. The Federated Societies is not involved in the Lemarr case.

"It's the social media that's the big difference in the almost 30 years I've been doing this," said Drew Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation, which takes in many of the horses seized in the state.

Social media, Fitzpatrick said, becomes "a platform for the accused, the alleged violator, to rant and rave ... and sucker people into their side of the equation who really don't know anything and are only hearing one side of the story. They don't have all the facts, and that's too bad."

Meanwhile, she added, "I can't say 'boo.' I've got to remain quiet. I can't refute any of their claims."

**Affidavits attest to good care**



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Horse breeder Candi Lemarr talked about life at her family farm. She has turned to social media to help fight seizure of animals from her farm.

Lemarr grew up in Brown County and returned home to open her farm a couple of years ago after working as a technology executive on the East Coast. A lifelong horse lover, she's been active as a youth riding coach and has created programs at Sapphire Farm to offer riding activities for children with disabilities.

On a scheduled visit last week, the farm appeared to be orderly and clean; bits, bridles and other gear in the tack room were spotless. Several of her remaining thoroughbreds are spending the winter in a heated barn, along with an assortment of cats, dogs and a blind pig named Wilbur. Another barn holds hay, alfalfa and other feed.

Lemarr's daughter, Clara, is an accomplished rider and is set to attend the University of Minnesota, Crookston this fall on a riding scholarship.

Court documents include several sworn affidavits attesting to Lemarr's good care of her horses, including from a veterinary student and a farrier who cared for the horses' hooves.

Lemarr is under a gag order in her court case and couldn't discuss the seizure of her animals. Her attorney, James Kuettner of Mankato, issued a statement on her behalf.

"Miss Lemarr is devastated by what happened," it read. "We are all foremost concerned about the welfare of the animals, but there seems to be some disagreement about how to go about achieving that.

"Miss Lemarr is actively pursuing her legal recourse. We are letting the legal process take care of itself; we are trying to make things right.

"There's been a lot of talk on social media related to this case from supporters on both sides, most of which is not true."

#### **Threats have been made**

The number of equine seizures in Minnesota has been relatively constant. In the past five years, the Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation has taken in between 48 and 72 equines a year, with an average of about 62. There's a reason for the stability, said Johnson, of the Federated Humane Societies: Rescuers don't want to take in horses unless they absolutely have to.

"We do not want to take your animals," she said, calling the potential cost of food, care, transportation and medical attention for multiple horses "astronomical."

"The majority of the cases, we're not running in to break down the door and take those animals," Johnson said. "I can't stress that enough."

But when authorities do seize animals, public blowback on social media is likely. Fitzpatrick said she's gotten two death threats in the last six months, along with other threats of bodily harm.

"Mainly coming from the crackhead people," she said. Others have accused her of selling seized horses for personal profit. The foundation does auction off seized animals in its care, with the money going toward its \$200,000 annual budget.

"The money that gets taken in goes to the horses," Fitzpatrick said. "I don't go to the Bahamas."

A ruling is expected soon on whether Lemarr can recover her animals. If they're not returned, it's possible that she could face misdemeanor criminal charges of mistreatment.

Lemarr has tried to raise money on GoFundMe, an online crowdfunding site. Her pleas for help with legal fees have been shared more than 4,500 times, but so far have only brought in about \$1,200 from 19 donors, a fraction of the stated \$25,000 goal.

Meanwhile, Sapphire Farm is continuing to reach out on social media, seeking support for its cause.

"Please help us get our very loved animals back," a recent Facebook post reads, with a photo collage of the farm's horses. "This is what we are fighting for."



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Candi Lemarr's daughter Clara, top, is an accomplished rider. She prepped her horse Ted, above, for a practice run around the family farm.

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