

LOCAL

Judge rejects plea to return horses to Sleepy Eye trainer

Judge rules that ex-owner accused of maltreatment was lucid when she relinquished ownership.

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

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Horses taken from a Sleepy Eye, Minn., equestrian farm will not be returned to the owner, after a judge ruled that she surrendered them voluntarily.

In November, Brown County authorities took seven horses, three donkeys and a pony from Sapphire Equestrian Farm after a complaint that the animals were malnourished. The owner, Candi Lemarr, petitioned for their return, claiming that the horses were well cared for and that she was under duress when she signed them over.

In an order issued Thursday, District Judge Robert Docherty ruled that Lemarr voluntarily gave up the animals and denied her request for an evidentiary hearing on the issue.

As she spoke with an investigator, the judge wrote, Lemarr was lucid, asking and answering questions clearly. She was not placed under arrest, and in fact was allowed to leave and pick up her son at school while investigators were on her farm.

Not only did Lemarr relinquish the animals, the judge wrote, she picked and chose which ones to keep and which ones to let go.

"She discussed with the veterinarian which animals could go and which she would keep; her decisions were rationally focused on keeping the animals that would allow her to continue to offer riding lessons and releasing the animals that were not income producers," the judge wrote.

Lemarr also claimed that a deputy "threw" her into his car, but the judge rejected that claim. According to video taken at the scene by investigators, he wrote, "At no point did any officer 'throw' [Lemarr] into a car."

Since her horses were taken, Lemarr has mounted [a campaign on social media](https://www.startribune.com/social-media-battles-complicate-seizure-of-minnesota-horses/600012438/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/social-media-battles-complicate-seizure-of-minnesota-horses/600012438/?refresh=true>), seeking support and donations toward her legal fees.

"We are disappointed by the result and are discussing options," Lemarr's attorney, James Kuettnner of Mankato, said Thursday.

The horses from Lemarr's farm went to the Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation in Zimmerman, where they're doing well, said Drew Fitzpatrick, the foundation's executive director.

"They continue to gain weight and condition," she said. "Some of them will be offered up for adoption through our adoption program." The foundation has a longstanding adoption program and also holds a yearly auction at which preapproved bidders may bid on animals, with the proceeds going to the foundation for the care of animals in its custody.

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ELIZABETH FLORES, STAR TRIBUNE

Horse breeder Candi Lemarr talked about life at her family farm in Sleepy Eye, Minn.

