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For Immediate Release

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BOARD MEMBERS OF TEARS RELEASE REACTION TO FORMER DIRECTOR'S ARREST

Beverly Lepore, Chairman of the Board of Birmingham nonprofit TEARS (the Emergency Animal Rescue Service) expressed mixed emotions at the announcement of today's arrest of former Executive Director, Terra Cotromano, on 20 counts of animal cruelty. "Terra was the founder of TEARS and controlled everything. We trusted her. But our first priority has to be the animals we rescue. When we realized the problems and especially that the animals were not being cared for properly, we tried everything we could to work with Terra. Animals were dying. Time was of the essence and we could not get her to respond. This situation has been very hard on all of us, especially the many volunteers who have devoted so many hours to TEARS." said Lepore.

The last several months have been one of the worst periods in TEARS' history. First, board members discovered from a local CPA that more than \$65,000 was unaccounted for in fiscal year 2008 alone. Then allegations about the poor care of rescued animals and mismanaged adoptions by former Executive Director, Terra Cotromano, began to surface as volunteers and donors filed complaints with police, federal and state agencies, local banks, and the Board of Directors.

In November 2009, the board chair received notice from the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations warning that audit notices were being ignored and that a summer hearing had been missed. In December a Regions' banker froze all accounts and the board attempted to conduct an audit of both the animal's health and the finances, all of which were allegedly blocked by Cotromano leading to her losing the job she'd held for several years.

On New Year's Eve the board received a temporary restraining order allowing them to access records and to determine the conditions of animals. After assessing every animal at TEARS', sheriff's deputies removed 22 dogs and 6 cats as part of an animal cruelty investigation. Veterinarians Barbara Monaghan, Cindy Williams, Mark Pelham, and Libby Todd of Liberty and Kelly Animal Hospitals provided the health assessments and medical recommendations to Jefferson County Sheriff's deputies on site at TEARS.

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Not far from the New Year's Day crisis a former TEARS' board member and volunteer, Donna Sophronia-Sims, watched the scandal unfold with a sense of déjà vu. Sims had filed a police report in 2008 detailing neglect and possible abuse to animals at TEARS. She had complained along with a handful of other former TEARS' volunteers and board members at a community meeting not long before the report was filed. The group claimed Cotromano's decision-making style as well as the lack of transparency of how money was spent were two of several problems leading to a myriad of safety issues at TEARS, but their complaints got them nowhere.

"Each person at the meeting saw a different aspect of alleged mismanagement at TEARS – sick cats being housed without treatment and in inhumane conditions, shy animals being grouped with dangerous animals, no documentation of animals or their treatment or the organization's finances, adoptions denied for no reason-- but everyone at the meeting all shared one concern - - the culture of intimidation at TEARS created by Cotromano. We all knew if you say something and have an opinion, you're gone," said Sims. "You could sense that from the first time you went to TEARS. I got off the board immediately because I knew the place had problems." Animal cruelty and abuse complaints were filed with police in 2009 by volunteers David Young and Danyelle Jackson.

By January 20th, 2010 the board had removed the remaining animals from TEARS' property including 115 dogs and 61 cats all of which received medical tests and treatments. Of the animals removed by the board, every cat suffered from serious upper respiratory infections. All but one of the cats responded well to treatment and are well today. One cat could not be saved. Many of the dogs had acute cases of adult heartworms and 68 dogs had to be treated for intestinal parasites.

The former TEARS' Director had made numerous public requests for emergency food in December. "We found out from the vets why so much food was needed at TEARS. Most of the dogs were infested with acute parasites. The parasites inside their bodies were getting all the food, not the dogs." said Lee Anne Bennett, Vice President of the Board. "Most of the dogs have recovered but one continues to have a hard time getting over an infection. Some people want to see pictures of the animal's injuries, but many of these animals were suffering and dying from things you could not see. Most of the animals began responding to treatment immediately. They did not have to die and they did not have to be euthanized. Now that they have gotten treatment, they are no longer suffering." said Bennett.

"We are cooperating fully with the Sheriff and the District Attorney in providing documentation and access to records. We believe that the truth will come out and that justice for these animals will be served. The sheriffs have made it clear to us that they take animal cruelty in our community very seriously. The support we have received from the public has been tremendous. We have 17 dogs and 13 cats still looking for forever homes and ask the community to consider one of these beautiful animals as a new family member." said Bennett.

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Additional comments may be obtained by speaking with any member of the animal assessment team that was on site. Due to the investigation in progress comments may be limited.

- Deputy Dwight Sloan, Jefferson County Animal Cruelty Investigator
- Jacque Meyer, Executive Director Greater Birmingham Humane Society 205-942-1211
- Wendell Allen – Attorney. Bradley, Arrant, Boulton & Cummings 521-8000
- John Saxon – Attorney. John Saxon 324-0223
- Veterinarians at Liberty Animal Hospital and Kelly Animal Hospital
 - Mark Pelham, DVM 205-746-6223
 - Barbara Monaghan, DVM 205-542-9312
- Lee Anne Bennett is available for comment immediately and on-camera interviews starting at 6:30 p.m. March 11, 2010.