

Animal Rescues Exploiting Nonprofit Status

Idaho Animal Rescue Network | April 11, 2025



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In a world where heartwarming videos and photos of animal rescues go viral within minutes, it's easy to believe every nonprofit animal rescue is doing honest, life-saving work. But behind the emotional music and dramatic recoveries, a darker reality is emerging—one where fake animal rescues are exploiting nonprofit status for profit, attention, and even cruelty. It's happening right here in Idaho.

Idaho Animal Rescue Network was founded after a disheartening experience volunteering with another local rescue. During our time there, we were met with more questions than answers—and a growing concern that the animals were not being prioritized above all else.

We began to question critical aspects of the organization's operations: the standard of care being provided, the living conditions of animals housed with board members, and the lack of clarity surrounding donations and adoption fees. When it came time to apply for grants, our requests for financial records and budget information were denied. There was no transparency, and our concerns were consistently dismissed.

It was through this experience that we first encountered the darker side of rescue—the side where compassion is overshadowed by ego, mismanagement, and a lack of accountability. That experience became the catalyst for building something better.

The Rise of the Scam Rescue

Over the past few years, a troubling trend has surfaced in the animal welfare community. Certain individuals or organizations posing as legitimate rescues have been found using fabricated, staged animal cruelty scenarios or using cases from other rescues and shelters as

their own to generate donations. These operations often register as 501(c)(3) nonprofits, lending an air of credibility and making donations tax-deductible—thus, more appealing to generous donors.

One troubling example recently came to light in Southern Idaho. A rescue claiming nonprofit status was found leveraging the hard work of legitimate organizations to pad its own image and wallet. In one case, this rescue shared a post about a dog needing a home—originally in the care of a reputable rescue in Washington. When a potential adopter contacted the rescue that actually had the dog and arranged an adoption directly, the shady nonprofit accused the legitimate group of "backdooring" them. Idaho Mastiff Rescue should be avoided!

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The audacity didn't end there. Despite never having physically cared for the dog, not having ever met the dog, not paying for any veterinary treatment, or playing any actual role in the rescue process, they demanded a \$400 adoption "fee" from the adopter. The Washington rescue never asked this rescue in Idaho to place or take in the dog. They only asked that they share the post about the dog looking for a home. When the Idaho Rescue didn't get that \$400 fee as a result of the adopter going to the legitimate rescue directly, they made a public post bashing the Washington rescue and proclaiming they were the victims of this "backdoor" treatment. The entitlement was astounding—and unjustified.

This same Idaho rescue also pulled something similar with a shelter in Colorado back in 2023.

Fast forward to this week: that same group made a highly emotional post featuring two dogs with urgent medical needs in a Los Angeles shelter. Their post garnered sympathy, shares, and offers of donations. No information was provided to the public, and only a link to their adoption application appeared. However, when actual rescues reached out to help and requested basic information to begin the process of pulling these dogs, they were met with silence. No replies. No transparency. No collaboration.

After reviewing their Facebook page, a troubling pattern emerged: they frequently share animals that are not in their care—dogs they've never met, assessed, or provided any veterinary support for. Promoting animals for adoption through their rescue without any firsthand involvement or responsibility is not only misleading but potentially dangerous for both the dogs and the adopters who trust that proper care and evaluation have taken place. Yet, they direct potential adopters to their own adoption application and require the \$400 adoption fee. Again, Idaho Mastiff Rescue.

The Anatomy of a Fake Rescue

These scam rescues often follow a pattern:

Staged or Exaggerated Abuse: Animals are intentionally placed in harm's way, neglected, or made to appear in distress for the sake of a compelling video or photo.

Rapid "Recovery" Stories: Videos often depict a dramatic transformation, sometimes using multiple animals or editing tricks to feign miraculous healing.

Donation Pleas: Emotional appeals accompany the content, urging viewers to donate "whatever they can" to continue the work.

Lack of Transparency: Financials, veterinary records, and adoption procedures are either missing or vague. When questioned, operators may become defensive or evasive.

Real Harm, Real Victims

While some scams may seem like harmless grifts, the toll is very real—especially for the animals involved. There have been cases where animals were intentionally harmed or denied medical treatment to prolong their "rescue story." Others are used repeatedly in staged scenarios, kept in poor conditions off-camera, or never actually rehomed.

On October 5th, 2022, in Nez Perce County, a dog named Shorty was shot twice in the face. The circumstances that led to this horrific incident are complex, and while multiple individuals played a role, the greatest responsibility lies with an Ada/Canyon County-based nonprofit rescue and its director. Idaho Mastiff Rescue nearly cost this dog his life.

This rescue director had never met Shorty, never vetted the foster home he was placed in, and had no direct involvement in the dog's care. Despite this, she instructed the foster to euthanize Shorty following an altercation with another dog—another unneutered male also living in the home. Had the fosters been properly vetted, Shorty should not have found himself set up for failure. That reckless decision led to a failed euthanasia attempt, which ultimately resulted in Shorty being shot.

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This part of the story is omitted from her public retellings. Instead, what followed was two excruciating days during which Shorty suffered alone in the woods, with devastating injuries: broken teeth, a damaged palate, a bullet still lodged in his jowl, and a severe infection. Once he was found by strangers, he required veterinary intervention to survive.

When contacted, the rescue director responsible for the botched euthanasia presented a polished narrative and made promises of financial support for Shorty's care. But when it came time for action, she did nothing. She refused to retrieve him, failed to send help, and never consulted a veterinarian regarding humane euthanasia options. Not a single resource or offer of aid came from her organization. She stopped responding to emails and texts altogether, leaving Shorty's care in our hands.

Our rescue stepped in without hesitation and without any financial support from the Ada County rescue that had orchestrated this disaster. We took on the full burden of Shorty's medical expenses and recovery, doing what should have been done from the start: acting in the animal's best interest. Shorty is now living his best life.

Shorty's case is not an isolated incident. His story highlights a growing problem in the rescue world—so-called “retail rescues” that operate more like opportunistic businesses than ethical nonprofits. These organizations exploit the goodwill of donors, fail to follow responsible placement protocols, and leave legitimate rescues to clean up the fallout.

The consequences go beyond individual animals. Reputable organizations are forced to stretch already limited resources to fix the damage, while public trust in rescue work erodes. Every time a group like this deceives supporters and shirks responsibility, it makes the work of legitimate, compassionate rescues that much harder.

Shorty's trauma was preventable. And it's time for more accountability in the rescue community—because animals deserve better, and so does the public that supports them.

The Role of Social Media and Loopholes

Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook have inadvertently become megaphones for these fraudulent operations. Their algorithms reward viral, emotionally charged content—regardless of authenticity. Some fake rescues earn thousands in ad revenue and fundraising, thriving in the absence of any oversight in Idaho.

Legally, the nonprofit system is part of the problem. In the U.S., it's relatively easy to obtain 501(c)(3) status with minimal vetting. Once granted, these organizations face little ongoing scrutiny unless serious complaints are filed.

Red Flags to Watch For

To avoid supporting a fake rescue, consider these warning signs:

Overly dramatic content: Constant posts featuring animals in extreme distress, always followed by requests for donations.

Lack of veterinary or adoption transparency: No names of veterinarians, no clear adoption process, and no updates on rehomed animals.

Failure to spay/neuter animals: Failing to spay or neuter animals before adoption, or requiring adopters to cover the cost of sterilization themselves—even after paying an adoption fee. If animals are too young to be spayed or neutered at the time of adoption, a legally binding spay/neuter agreement should be enforced.

Untraceable finances: Limited or no IRS filings, no shared budgets, or unexplained spending.

Sensationalism over sustainability: Focus is on clicks and views, not meaningful rescue or community impact.

How to Help Responsibly

Research before donating. Use tools like Charity Navigator, GuideStar, or the IRS Nonprofit Lookup to verify legitimacy. However, they too can inadvertently add legitimacy to these scam rescues.

Support local rescues and shelters. Visit in person, ask questions, and see the impact for yourself.

Report suspicious behavior. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook allow you to report harmful or misleading content. You can also file complaints with the IRS, your secretary of state, or local authorities.

Final Thoughts

Animal rescue should be rooted in compassion and care—not exploitation and deceit. As donors and animal lovers, we have a responsibility to look beyond the feel-good stories and ensure our support goes to organizations that are truly making a difference. Because when fake rescues flourish, the animals—and real rescuers—suffer the most.

Update: By now many of you have figured out that this blog post is entirely about Tannya Cluff and Idaho Mastiff Rescue. This all really happened. We have the emails, the texts, the NPCSO report, and additional documentation to back it all up.

Source & Contact

Current story: <https://idahorescue.com/fake-animal-rescues/>

Website: IdahoRescue.org | Email: hello@IdahoRescue.org