



Sheriff Nienhuis Turns Blind Eye to Torture and Murder of Countless Animals

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Image Provided by ARM

BROOKSVILLE – Hernando County Sheriff Al Nienhuis is in hot water today after an investigator with Animal Rescue Mission (ARM) claims he refused to issue arrest warrants for individuals operating an illegal slaughterhouse.



ARM Investigator Richard Couto held a [press conference](#) today in Tampa, where he shared the horrific details of how owners Juan Ortiz and his son Juan Ortiz Jr used 2x4s and bats to beat animals to death before butchering and selling their meat to vendors and individuals around Florida. Couto says he began investigating the slaughterhouse, which is located at 15064 Vicki Lane, in 2022 after finding an ad on Craigslist. Couto and other members of ARM infiltrated the business and began collecting video evidence of how the owners brutally murdered livestock and sold their meat.



Image Provided by ARM

PRESS CONFERENCE VIDEO

Couto provided the following summary of the investigation:

During this investigation, Ortiz confessed to ARM operatives that he had been butchering cows, horses, sheep, goats, and poultry at this location for over four years.

He also disclosed to servicing individual customers, supplying to small markets, butcher shops, restaurants, catering events, trading live animals for meat, and religious sacrifice. They are also selling to USDA animal slaughterhouses that ARM has previously investigated.

While undercover, ARM witnessed and documented some of the most inhumane, illegal, and violent crimes executed upon animals, including pigs being struck repeatedly over the head with 2 x 4 wooden slabs,

being asphyxiated by ropes, and stabbed repeatedly in the chest / heart and hammered to death.

As grim as these findings revealed, the most prominent component of this case, titled Operation Barker, lies around ARM obtaining the entire process of horses being killed for their meat for human consumption. This has never been documented by an animal advocacy organization or any law enforcement agency.

ARM's findings revealed that Ortiz and his backyard business is heavily connected to the black-market horse meat industry that has been running rampant throughout the State of Florida for decades, now reaching the status of organized crime for stealing, procuring, transporting, receiving, killing, and selling horse meat across county, and even state lines.

Furthermore, this investigation unveiled the butchering of not just any horse but a registered, tattooed thoroughbred racehorse known as Funny Biz -an 8-year-old mare whose lineage traces back to the infamous Secretariat. This type of crime escalates slaughtering horses from a third-degree felony under The Good Horse Slaughter ACT to a second-degree felony conviction and a penalty of up to 15 years imprisonment for killing an identified thoroughbred.

Ortiz's animal slaughter farm is not only guilty of brutally torturing and killing animals for a profit on a large scale, but he has also been operating without any licenses, registrations, or regulations by an agency, imposing a grave risk to the health and safety of customers and consumers for preparing and selling unsanitary meat. This location is mere miles from the Hernando County Sheriff's Office.

During Operation Barker, ARM witnessed and documented multiple felony acts of animal cruelty resulting in death and countless misdemeanor crimes that were executed by Juan 'George' Ortiz, his son Carlos Jr, and several employees of Ortiz.

ARM presented this case to the Hernando Sheriff's Office as well as multiple state agencies, including FDLE and the USDA.

Couto says Sheriff Al Nienhuis and the State Attorney's Office refused to take action after months of working undercover to put together an airtight case. To this day, he says the slaughterhouse is still in operation.

Couto told reporters today, "This is the first time in U.S. history, if not global, that a tattooed thoroughbred racehorse has been killed, sectioned, butchered, and its meat sold in the United States for human consumption. Number two, enforcement, or the lack thereof. The lack of enforcement in this case is so extreme and sickening." Couto says the slaughter of "Funny Biz" is a 2nd-degree felony and punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

"For years this has been going on, unenforced, why, because straight out of the Hernando County Sheriff's Office themselves, 'we know nothing, we're blind in this case, we don't know what we're doing.'" Couto goes on to say, "How could the Sheriff get this wrong? How could the State Attorney get this wrong?" Couto explains that the Sheriff's Office made one misdemeanor arrest for animal cruelty but says they did not seize the animals. "That is unconscionable and should be illegal. They should be held accountable by the media, by the constituents of Hernando County and by anyone and everyone who loves horses and animals."



[Sheriff Al Nienhuis](#)

Couto says the Sheriff's Office told him, "We have a lot of county fairs right now, our deputies are overloaded," among other "excuses" as to why they refused to make an arrest. "Whatever excuses they gave, they are stalling..." Couto believes the Sheriff refuses to discuss this case because he is up for reelection in just under 30 days.

Candidate for Sheriff Joe Puglia released a statement today, calling for Sheriff Nienhuis to step down and drop out of the race.

Today, I was sickened by the news of Sheriff Al Nienhuis allowing an illegal slaughterhouse to operate in Hernando County. But not just any slaughterhouse, a house of horrors for various livestock that were brutally murdered and dismembered. I was especially heartbroken to hear that a beautiful, retired racehorse named Funny Biz was among those murdered and sold for human consumption.

Sheriff Nienhuis was fully aware of the operation for months, and to this day he refuses to hold the owners accountable or even rescue the animals that are facing a horrific death.

Sheriff Nienhuis has failed the community he swore to protect and is an embarrassment to the deputies he commands.

Because of this monumental failure, among countless others, I am calling for Sheriff Nienhuis to immediately resign and end his bid for reelection.

R News and other media outlets contacted the Sheriff's Office for comment, but they would only advise that the investigation is still active.

Coincidentally, Hernando County Commissioner Beth Narverud has been working with Nienhuis to shift the responsibility of County's Animal Shelter to the Sheriff's Office, but in light of Nienhuis' egregious failure to protect the lives of animals and arrest those who murdered them, the community may not stand for that transition. The Board of County Commissioners will hold a meeting on July 30th to discuss the merger. Citizens will be allowed to speak during the meeting and confront officials on their plans to place Nienhuis in charge of caring for hundreds of animals.

R News will continue to follow this story and provide updates as they develop.