

# *Humane Society C.E.O. Resigns Amid Sexual Harassment Allegations*

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The chief executive of the Humane Society of the United States resigned on Friday after sexual harassment allegations against him prompted an uprising from staff and donors.

The executive, Wayne Pacelle, who was the face of the Humane Society for more than a decade, had held onto support from a majority of the group's board, which voted on Thursday to immediately end an investigation into his behavior.

Yet by Friday afternoon, donors and employees of the organization, one of the most prominent animal welfare groups in the nation, were distancing themselves from Mr. Pacelle, condemning the board's decision and calling for him to leave. In an email to the staff, Mr. Pacelle said late Friday that because "our mission depends on unity," he was stepping aside to allow a search for a successor to begin.

"I am resigning, effective immediately, to allow that process to move forward expeditiously and to put aside any distractions, in the best interests of all parties," he wrote.

The resignation of Mr. Pacelle, 52, who was known as a charismatic, aggressive promoter of the Humane Society, capped weeks of tumult that shook the society and its reputation. In December, the organization commissioned a law firm in Washington to conduct an internal investigation into allegations of workplace misconduct by Mr. Pacelle. The Washington Post originally reported the allegations, which included complaints from a former intern who said Mr. Pacelle kissed her against her will in 2005, a former employee who said he asked to

masturbate in front of her and offered her oral sex in a hotel room in 2006, and a former employee who said he stopped by her office late one night in 2012 and asked her to salsa dance with him.

In an interview on Friday, Mr. Pacelle denied the allegations, and suggested that an investigation into a single complaint from 2005 had expanded into other claims as part of “this coordinated campaign against the Humane Society.”

The chairman of the board, Eric L. Bernthal, attempted to calm the turmoil in an email to staff on Friday before Mr. Pacelle announced he was leaving.

The investigation into Mr. Pacelle’s behavior was not finished when details of it were leaked to the media, Mr. Bernthal said, leading the board to end the inquiry.

“Many of these allegations were explosive in nature, and reading or hearing about them is a shock to anyone,” Mr. Bernthal wrote. “It was to us, too. But when we sifted through the evidence presented, we simply did not find that many of these allegations were supported by credible evidence.”

By the end of the day, though, the group’s leaders were no longer able to contain the damage.

Jennifer Fearing, who worked as a lobbyist for the Humane Society, said early Friday that because of the board’s decision to retain Mr. Pacelle, she would not renew her contract to work for the organization.

“I can’t make any sense of the board’s decision to end the investigation,” she said. “Women were still coming forward yesterday. That these so-called leaders weren’t inclined to learn more about the sexualized culture that many employees experienced over many years is beyond comprehension to me and feels like a betrayal of trust.”

As chief executive, Mr. Pacelle expanded the organization’s focus beyond the protection of cats and dogs to efforts like opposing puppy mills, dogfighting, abuse of seals and some industrial farming practices.

Through a series of mergers, affiliations and corporate partnerships with other animal protection and animal care groups, Mr. Pacelle, who held his position since 2004, is credited with building the Humane Society into the nation's 138th largest charity. The organization had more than \$210 million in net assets at the end of 2016, according to its latest nonprofit filings. Records put Mr. Pacelle's base salary at more than \$330,000 in 2016.

Explaining the board's decision to retain Mr. Pacelle after an hours-long telephone meeting, one board member, Erika Brunson, 83, said in an interview that she was aware only of what she called a "ridiculous" old accusation against him regarding an alleged affair.

She said Mr. Pacelle had "done nothing wrong."

"Which red-blooded male hasn't sexually harassed somebody?" she added.

"Women should be able to take care of themselves." On Friday, Ms. Brunson resigned from the board.

But some people who worked with Mr. Pacelle said they believed the board had erred by not firing him.

Alison Schiebelhut, 36, an employee since 2010, said in an interview that she had a consensual relationship with Mr. Pacelle from 2002 to 2003, when she was an intern at the Humane Society. She then returned to the organization in 2010 to do legal and policy work.

On more than one occasion after 2010, she said, Mr. Pacelle summoned her to his office and pressured her for sex. She said she refused and once tried to placate him with a hug. After hugging her goodbye, he turned her around, pushed her over his desk and rubbed his genitals against her, she said.

"I said, 'I'm going to elbow you really hard right now if you don't stop,'" she recalled. "I stood up for myself, and then he just went and sat down. He never hit on me again."

Ms. Schiebelhut, who said she spoke this week to the law firm investigating Mr. Pacelle, said she did not report the incidents to her superiors at the time, but was confident they would have taken action had she done so.

Peggy Kokernot Kaplan, a former chairwoman of an advisory council for the Humane Society, said in an email that she had learned of sexual harassment at the organization after she stepped down in 2014.

“I also heard so many undercurrents from women afraid to speak up for fear of retaliation if they pursued work with another animal organization, or they simply didn’t feel their voices would be heard if they did speak up,” she said.

Late Friday, Kitty Block was named acting president and chief executive of the Humane Society. Ms. Block, a lawyer, is currently president of Humane Society International, the global affiliate of the Humane Society of the United States.

One women’s group applauded the decision but said that questions remained about the leadership of the animal welfare group.

“It’s good that he’s gone, but we have to question this board and the culture of the Humane Society,” said Toni Van Pelt, president of the National Organization for Women.

Ms. Van Pelt said the board members needed to apologize to the women who were harassed and ask Mr. Pacelle to do the same.

“I think this is not the end of this story for the Humane Society with the way this board voted,” Ms. Van Pelt said.

Sandra E. Garcia, Mitch Smith and Matthew Haag contributed reporting. Jack Begg and Doris Burke contributed research.