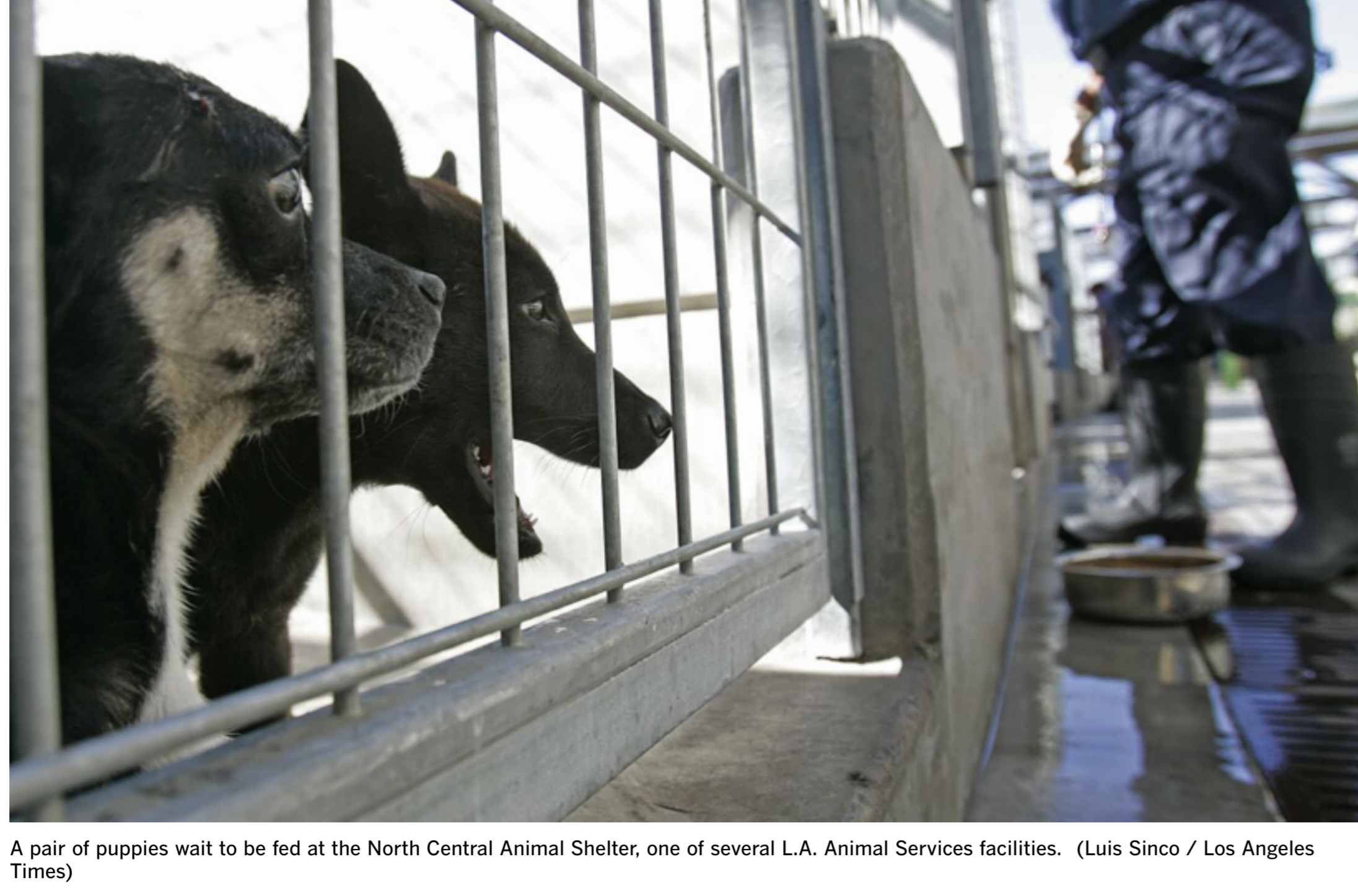




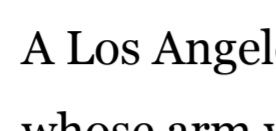
CALIFORNIA

Volunteer awarded \$6.8 million after being mauled at animal shelter run by troubled L.A. agency



A pair of puppies wait to be fed at the North Central Animal Shelter, one of several L.A. Animal Services facilities. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

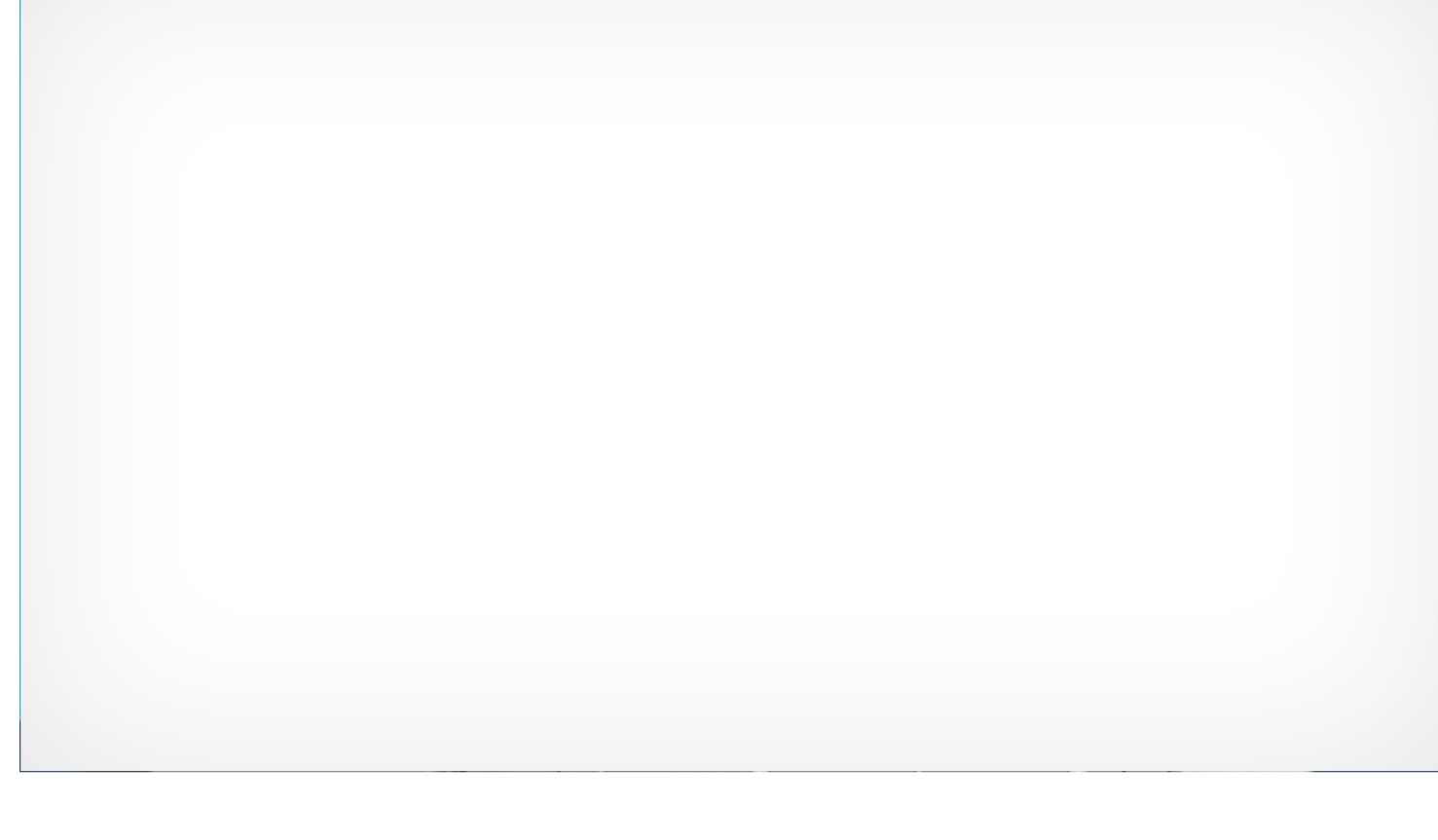
BY NATHAN SOLIS | STAFF WRITER
MAY 31, 2023 3:46 PM PT



A Los Angeles jury on Tuesday awarded \$6.8 million to an animal shelter volunteer whose arm was nearly ripped off in a dog attack, finding the city liable for gross negligence.

Kelly Kaneko, 36, still has nerve and bone damage in her right arm, where the dog latched onto her for over five minutes in October 2019, forcing her to drag herself and the dog around the facility to find help.

She said she had been motivated to volunteer at a Los Angeles Animal Services facility in Lincoln Heights after hearing that dogs are often ignored by limited staff in [shelters run by the troubled city agency](#), where [volunteers are sorely needed](#).



"I love animals with all my heart," Kaneko said through sobs in an interview Wednesday. "I felt so bad that this was their situation."

On the day of the attack, Kaneko was asked to move a 100-pound German shepherd mix named Jaxx from a kennel to another part of the facility where a prospective family could meet him, according to her lawsuit.

Shelter staff let Kaneko know that Jaxx was "grumpy," but there were no other formal warnings about his history. Kaneko did not know that Jaxx had bitten his previous owner, that he was surrendered back to the city facility, or that the previous owner told the shelter Jaxx seemed aggressive and was a threat, according to Kaneko's attorney Ivan Puchalt.

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A former director with the Animal Services department testified at trial that the dog's status as aggressive should have been noted on his kennel, Puchalt said.

"That was an open question at trial as to whether they did or didn't put a yellow mark on Jaxx's [record] card," Puchalt said. "There definitely wasn't one on the day of the incident."

Kaneko, an untrained volunteer, brought Jaxx back to his kennel alone. After she removed his leash, he attacked her and latched onto her arm, refusing to let go.

She called for help and was unable to break free as the dog's jaws vice-gripped onto her arm.

After several minutes, Kaneko dragged herself and the dog about 250 feet from the kennels to the shelter's main facility. There was one employee on the premises, but that worker was wearing earplugs at the recommendation of the shelter operators because previous employees had complained of losing their hearing, Puchalt said.

Because that person could not see Kaneko, she was forced to drag herself and Jaxx to the front of the facility, where eventually the employee spotted them and came to Kaneko's aid.

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An ambulance took Kaneko to L.A. County-USC Medical Center, where she underwent multiple surgeries and skin grafts. She spent nearly 40 days in the intensive care unit, and although she was told she would likely lose her hand, it was saved but remains severely damaged, according to her attorney.

"When she arrived at the ER, her hand was officially dead," Puchalt said. "Her hand gets less blood now than it used to. It always feels cold. And it's often a different color. She has a very faint pulse and it's a very serious injury despite the amazing work they did. She hasn't been made whole."

Kaneko added, "There's lots of things I won't be able to do for life."

Images of a woman's scarred arm, left, and the back of her legs, with a long scar on right calf.

Evidence images of Kelly Kaneko's right arm post-surgery in November 2019, after she was mauled by a dog at the North Central Animal Shelter in Los Angeles where she volunteered. (Steve Youmans via Greene Broiliet & Wheeler)

Jaxx was euthanized a few months after the attack, Puchalt said.

Kaneko hopes the verdict will lead to lasting changes with the city's policies, which the jury found put her in harm's way.

"This is a victory for a lot of volunteers as well because there will be more who are protected," Kaneko said.

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A spokesperson for the city attorney's office declined to comment on the jury's verdict.

The Times has chronicled worsening conditions at L.A. city animal shelters, including [inadequate care for dogs](#) and [small animals](#). At the same time, the department lacks volunteers who are trained to handle larger dogs, so those dogs are caged for longer periods without walks. The confinement puts stress on dogs, making it harder for them to be adopted and putting them on a track to be euthanized.

Two recent reports — [one](#) by former City Councilmember Paul Koretz, [the other](#) from City Controller Kenneth Mejia — detailed Animal Services' various problems, including a lack of employees, leading the department to [request a major funding increase](#) to hire more staff.

Times staff writer Dakota Smith contributed to this report.

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Nathan Solis is a Metro reporter covering breaking news at the Los Angeles Times. He previously worked for Courthouse News Service, where he wrote both breaking news and enterprise stories ranging from criminal justice to homelessness and politics. Before that, Solis was at the Redding Record Searchlight as a multimedia journalist, where he anchored coverage of the destructive 2017 fires in Northern California. Earlier in his career, he worked for Eastsider L.A.

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