

Industry commitment on Thoroughbred aftercare cannot wait

by [Ray Paulick](#)
Paulick Report

How much more evidence do horse industry leaders need that time is running out for them to put together a mandatory, broad-based funding mechanism to support Thoroughbred aftercare programs?

Two weeks ago came the shocking details of the alleged horse adoption for slaughter scheme of Kelsey Lefever, a 24-year-old Pennsylvania woman operating out of Penn National racecourse. Yesterday, we learned of the sickening discovering of four emaciated ex-racehorses ó three Thoroughbreds and a Quarter horse ó in the northwest section of Miami-Dade County in South Florida. They were found in an area known for illegal butchering of horses for human consumption.

Thankfully, those four horses might be saved due to the efforts of several groups dedicated to transitioning horses from the racetrack to a new career and keeping them out of the slaughter pipeline. The four horses named in the criminal complaint against Kelsey Lefever are gone, their lives ended unnecessarily.

Because Frank and Frieda Stronach recently created the Gulfstream Park Thoroughbred After-Care program, groups like Florida TRAC (Thoroughbred Retirement and Adoptive Care) have additional funds to attempt to nurse these horses back to good health. The Miami-Dade County horses were found by Richard Couto of the Animal Recovery Mission, which is working in conjunction with Florida TRAC and Gulfstream Park Thoroughbred After-Care, from which it has received funding.

Stacie Clark, who has worked with the StronachsøAdena Retirement Program and is now a director of the Gulfstream Park initiative, said the cooperation among the different South Florida groups is essential, calling it a òmarriage made in heaven.ö She credited Couto and Celia Fawkes, intake director of Florida TRAC for their work in attempting to save the horses and help identify those responsible. Investigators are tracking the Thoroughbreds through their lip tattoos.

òThe industry should know what is happening,ö said Clark. òThis was on at least three different newscasts on Miami television, but the entire industry gets hurt from stories like this. Horseracing is getting a black eye on Facebook and Internet forums. The industry needs to get behind programs like Florida TRAC, TRF, New Vocations and others. They need to be funded by the industry.

òPeople are not taking care of stray dogs and stray kids. Theyøre sure not going to be taking care of stray horses.ö

The Thoroughbred industry is only as strong as its weakest link, and incidents like the one in Miami, the Kelsey Lefever criminal investigation, or the recent discovery of malnourished and dead horses on a Louisiana farm gives horse racing everywhere a bad name.

It's been more than seven months since Thoroughbred owner Jack Wolf of Starlight Stables tried to singlehandedly kick-start industry funding. He organized a meeting in New York the week of the Belmont Stakes, inviting a broad base of representatives from across the racing, breeding, organizational and aftercare spectrum. That group, which eventually was formed as a 501(c)3 organization named the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance, has had a series of meetings and an agreement in principle that something needs to be done. But the stumbling block, of course, is money.

Clark has been a participant at the alliance discussions. "My takeaway from the meetings," she said, "is that too many of these groups are just protecting what they have. They are just sitting there, and instead of making a commitment are wondering what the guy next to him is going to do. We need to look at these recent events as an opportunity to finally make the necessary commitment.

"We are still waiting for the industry to say this is important enough to do something."