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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Indictment of Defendants in Connection with
March, 2026 Sussex County Dog Abandonment Case

Charges:	**Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty (Third Degree)** **Animal Cruelty (Third Degree)** **Conspiracy to Tamper with Evidence (Fourth Degree)** **Tampering with Evidence (Fourth Degree)**
Potential Sentences:	**Up to Three to Five Years of New Jersey State Prison**
Defendants:	**Joshua Ciemniecki, Phillipsburg, NJ (Age 19)** **Kaila McNeill, Stewartsville, NJ (Age 30)** **Francis Ciemniecki, Phillipsburg, NJ (Age 72)** **Cynthia Ciemniecki, Phillipsburg, NJ (Age 50)** **Robert Ciemniecki, Phillipsburg, NJ (Age 74)**

Sussex County Prosecutor Daniel M. Perez announced the indictment of five individuals in connection with the abandonment of more than 40 small dogs throughout Sussex County earlier this year. The eight-count indictment, which a Sussex County grand jury handed up on November 5, 2026, names Joshua Ciemniecki, Kaila McNeill, Francis Ciemniecki, Cynthia Ciemniecki, and Robert Ciemniecki as defendants. The defendants are related.

An extensive criminal investigation conducted by the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office revealed the following: At approximately 7:30 p.m. on March 16, 2026, New Jersey State Police Sussex Station was advised of an animal complaint in Stillwater Township, New Jersey. Upon arrival, troopers observed approximately eight (8) small dogs running around a parking lot, on the loose, with an open black cage laying nearby. An Animal Control Officer responded but was unable to capture the dogs. The dogs were believed to be mixed Chihuahua/Jack Russell breed. The weather that evening was rainy, windy, and cold. The National Weather Service had issued a Tornado Watch at 11:30 a.m. in Sussex County, identifying potential tornadoes, quarter-sized hail and wind gusts up to 80 miles per hour.

At 8:42 p.m., NJSP Sussex Troopers were dispatched to Lafayette Township, New Jersey in reference to a similar complaint regarding loose dogs, several of which had been caught by local

residents. Other dogs were observed running into the woods. The dogs appeared to be mixed Chihuahua/Jack Russell breed. A few minutes later, a different Lafayette Township resident arrived at Sussex Station with five (5) additional dogs that she had captured.

At 8:43 p.m., NJSP Sussex Troopers responded to a third location in Wantage Township, New Jersey in reference to a complaint of small stray dogs. Upon arrival, troopers observed at least seven (7) small dogs. Troopers were able to capture four dogs. All of the dogs were the same breed as the dogs found in Stillwater and Lafayette Townships. Troopers also located two black cages that appeared to have been thrown approximately 10 yards into the wood line at the scene. The cage doors were ajar. Animal Control Officers responded to the scene.

Over the next seven (7) days, law enforcement officers from the New Jersey State Police, the Sussex County Sheriff's Office, and the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office searched for additional dogs on foot and with drones. Animal Control Officers from Newton, Wantage, and Vernon Townships assisted. As news of the incident spread, local residents and volunteers joined the search.

A total of approximately 34 dogs, all mixed Chihuahua/Jack Russell breed, were captured alive. Two dogs were found deceased, one of which had been mauled by predators. One of the captured dogs went into labor and died on the operating table. Two newborn dogs survived but two other newborn dogs did not survive. At least five (5) dogs were unaccounted for. Many of the surviving dogs sustained serious injuries (including broken teeth, facial injuries and injured legs) consistent with trauma sustained from being thrown within a cage. Local veterinarians volunteered their time and services to provide care for the surviving dogs. Father John's Animal House provided temporary shelter for the dogs. For several days, the Sussex County Sheriff's Office flew drones over Sussex County locations and found (among many others) a dog stuck in a swamp deep in the woods of Stillwater Township. The dog demonstrated signs of hypothermia.

Following the incident, detectives with the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office High-Tech Crimes and Grand Jury Units conducted a months-long investigation. Among other things, detectives seized some of the defendants' cellphones pursuant to search warrants and performed digital forensic examinations on those phones, which revealed evidence of the defendants' locations during the abandonments and their communications with each other. On November 5, 2026, a Sussex County Grand Jury indicted Joshua Ciemniecki, Kaila McNeill, Francis Ciemniecki, Cynthia Ciemniecki, and Robert Ciemniecki for the following criminal offenses:

1. Joshua Ciemniecki: Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree, Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree;

2. Kayla McNeill: Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree, Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree, Conspiracy to Tamper with Evidence in the Fourth Degree, and Tampering with Evidence in the Fourth Degree;

3. Francis Ciemniecki: Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree;

4. Cynthia Ciemniecki: Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree, Conspiracy to Tamper with Evidence in the Fourth Degree; and

5. Robert Ciemniecki: Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Third Degree, Conspiracy to Commit Animal Cruelty in the Fourth Degree.

The indictment charges the defendants with committing the following overt acts:

1. JOSHUA R. CIEMNIECKI and ROBERT CIEMNIECKI loaded dogs into a Dodge Durango to transport those dogs to various locations in Sussex County so that they could be abandoned without providing food, water, security, or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions;

2. JOSHUA R. CIEMNIECKI drove the Dodge Durango to various locations throughout Sussex County, including the Townships of Stillwater, Wantage, and Lafayette, where he abandoned dogs without providing food, water, security, or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions;

3. KAYLA M. MCNEILL drove a rented U-Haul van to various locations throughout Sussex County, including the Townships of Stillwater, Wantage, and Lafayette, where she abandoned dogs without providing food, water, security, or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions;

4. FRANCIS CIEMNIECKI paid for the rented U-Haul van which KAILA M. MCNEILL drove, and further provided gas money to KAILA M. MCNEILL for the rented U-Haul van, thereby promoting or facilitating the scheme to transport the dogs so that they could be abandoned at various locations without providing food, water, security or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions;

5. KAILA M. MCNEILL observed that the U-Haul rental van had windows that needed to be covered up, and enlisted CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI to provide tape and other supplies to cover the windows in the rented U-Haul van;

6. CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI provided tape and other supplies to KAILA M. MCNEILL so that the rented U-Haul van's windows could be covered, thereby promoting or facilitating the scheme to transport the dogs so that they could be abandoned at various locations without providing food, water, security or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions; and

7. CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI directed KAILA M. MCNEILL and JOSHUA R. CIEMNIECKI to drive to various locations including Warren County, New Jersey, Sussex County, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to abandon dogs at those locations without providing food, water, security, or proper shelter during brutally cold and adverse weather conditions.

The investigation further revealed that Cynthia Ciemniecki and Kaila McNeill, who are mother and daughter, respectively, conspired with each other to tamper with evidence. The indictment charges them with committing the following overt acts:

1. CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI and KAILA M. MCNEILL both believed an official proceeding or investigation was pending or about to be instituted. Among other things, KAILA M. MCNEILL texted CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI on March 16, 2026, in sum and substance, "M gunna go to jail."

2. KAILA M. MCNEILL texted a video to CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI that depicted a rural road and parking area where she drove the rented U-Haul van. On the video, dogs could be heard barking inside the U-Haul van. It is unknown whether dogs were abandoned at that particular location.

3. After CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI received the video from KAILA M. MCNEILL, CYNTHIA CIEMNIECKI texted KAILA M. MCNEILL, in sum or substance, "Delete the video."

4. KAILA M. MCNEILL deleted the video.

The defendants are scheduled to be arraigned on the indictment on November 16, 2026 at 9:00 a.m. before the Hon. Janine M. Allen, J.S.C., at the Sussex County Judicial Center, Courtroom 302, Newton, New Jersey.

"The indictment of these defendants reflects our commitment to enforcing the law, protecting vulnerable animals, and holding individuals accountable for acts of animal cruelty," Prosecutor Perez stated. "Pet owners who are unable or unwilling to care for their animals have responsible options, including arranging for their adoption or surrendering them to a local animal shelter. What they cannot do is abandon animals in the woods, leaving them without food, water, or shelter. Such conduct will not be tolerated," he continued.

Prosecutor Perez extends his appreciation to the New Jersey State Police, Sussex Station; Sheriff Michael Strada and the Sussex County Sheriff's Office; the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office's High-Tech Crime and Grand Jury Units, and Newton Animal Control, Wantage Animal Control, and Vernon Animal Control for their efforts. He also thanks the many community volunteers who searched for the dogs, the local veterinarians who donated their services to care for the dogs, and Father John's Animal House.

Matthew Young, Esq. represents Joshua Ciemniecki. Jenna Casper, Esq. represents Kaila McNeill. The identity of counsel for the remaining defendants is presently unknown. The State is represented by Sussex County Supervising Assistant Prosecutor Karen Lodeserto.

An indictment contains factual allegations and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.