



- News
- War on Terror
- Metro
- North County
- State/The West
- Nation
- Mexico
- World
- Business
- Technology
- Science
- Politics
- Military
- Education
- Travel
- Solutions
- Special Reports
- Features
- Weather
- Forums
- Opinion
- Columnists
- U-T Daily Paper
- U-T Email Edition
- Archives
- AP Wire

National Red Cross removes board of San Diego chapter

 [SAVE THIS](#)  [EMAIL THIS](#)  [PRINT THIS](#)  [MOST POPULAR](#)

By Norberto Santana Jr. and David Washburn
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

June 6, 2002

National Red Cross leaders summarily fired the entire board of the San Diego chapter Thursday, citing a drastic drop in fundraising and public credibility.

It was the first time Red Cross officials could remember that the national organization had disbanded a local chapter's board.

"The reason the chapter exists is to provide services, not controversy," said Jim Topping, a volunteer overseeing chapter services across the country who was in San Diego Thursday for the announcement.

Topping said Red Cross headquarters had watched in dismay at how the chapter has responded to criticism over its response to the 2001 Alpine fire. Critics said the chapter misled the public on how donations were spent. Topping said the local board had become so dysfunctional that it could not even adopt the next year's fiscal budget.

"We have gone far enough, not another step," Topping said.

The last straw apparently came a week ago when the local board, after several hours of discussion, refused to vote on whether to fire CEO Dodie Rotherham. National officials, who had asked Rotherham to resign, then stepped in and gave her a June 8 deadline to retire or be terminated.

Classes start every month!

Start Here

CALIFORNIA COLLEGE
SAN DIEGO



Yellow Pages

- Bars & Clubs
- Business Services
- Computers
- Education
- Health & Beauty
- Home & Garden
- Hotels
- Restaurants
- Shopping
- Travel

Search by
Company Name:

Local Guides

That was the final act of months of tense negotiations between local and national officials over Rotherham's position with the Red Cross. The national organization had been pressing the local board to remove Rotherham, even agreeing to mediation with Rotherham and her attorneys.

Sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of a fear they might be sued, said those efforts failed when Rotherham asked for a severance package of more than \$3 million.

National Red Cross spokesman Bob Chlopak would not discuss such specifics of the negotiations.

"Our side walked into the mediation session in good faith and thought there was a reasonable chance of success," Chlopak said. "Once we got in there, we found that we were far apart and wondered why the other side wanted mediation."

Rotherham, who is on a stress-related medical leave, did not return a call requesting an interview Thursday.

After their efforts at mediation failed, national officials turned up the heat on local board members to take action against Rotherham. But local board members would not act, some because of loyalty to Rotherham, others out of fear of being sued by her.

Board members contacted Thursday were surprised by the ouster.

"Holy mackerel. I was just getting used to the job and now I've been fired," said recently elected board president Larry Valente, who conceded the board was having problems.

Another ousted board member applauded the purge.

"We let the community down," said board member Marie-Claire Brien. "It should have been our decision to make, and we did not step up to the plate."

Brien, who is also a Red Cross disaster services volunteer, said it was the only option left.

"It was very clear that there were board members who were not willing to move on," she said.

Cars
Coupons
Eldercare
Financial Guide
Health
Homes
Jobs
Legal Guide
Shopping

However, another board member said the national action will do further harm to the chapter.

"I think this is going to be damaging to the local Red Cross," said Board Vice President Sharon Hilliard. "Anytime you have an organization taken over by edict from Washington, D.C., you have to be concerned about local control."

Mindful of the unprecedented nature of the action, Topping said the entire San Diego saga would end up becoming a "case study" for the charity, illustrating the need to balance local control and national oversight.

For the time being, the chapter will be under the control of the Red Cross' regional headquarters for the West. The chapter's bylaws have been suspended and a three- to five-person advisory committee will work with interim CEO Dr. Heath Rada, the head of the Richmond, Va., Red Cross chapter, to appoint a new board of directors.

Officials said there would be no interruption in the chapter's disaster relief services.

At the same time Topping was announcing national's move, the independent panel established by the San Diego Red Cross released its final report, which called for sweeping changes at the 104-year old chapter.

The report concluded, "It is clear the local chapter's board failed in its community responsibility."

The panel members, who had already called for the removal of Rotherham and the two top board members, endorsed the action taken by the national Red Cross.

Members said the panel's relationship with the chapter turned ugly as soon as they began requesting documents, many of which it never received. Most of these documents centered around Rotherham, including her salary, perks and performance evaluations.

"They essentially stifled us on everything," said Barry Newman, the panel's vice chairman.

"What this committee has been able to uncover (without the full cooperation of the chapter), is enough to cause any thoughtful person

to ask serious questions concerning the chapter's governance, accountability and identity in the community," the panel's report said.

Panel chairman Jay Goldby said that, from his perspective, it was clear that it was Rotherham, and not the board, who ran the chapter.

"They relied on her to interpret the bylaws and tell them what they could and could not do," he said.

In its report, the panel recommended that the chapter:

refocus on its core mission of disaster relief rather than on such contract services as transportation.

open its finances and operation for public scrutiny.

reach out to the public to get input on what services are needed.

make sure its executive committee does not operate autonomously, and reports all its actions to the full board .

better educate board members on the Red Cross' policies on finances and disaster services.

Since the panel issued its preliminary report in April, the two top board members have stepped down. Rotherham has refused.

Rotherham has accused the independent panel of being biased against her, saying it was controlled by her enemies. She has complained she wasn't interviewed by the panel, though the panel's report said its members interviewed her several times.

Topping said he fully endorsed the panel's findings.

"I absolutely support what I read," he said. "It becomes a primer for the future volunteers" who will serve on the board.

Santana:
(619) 593-4964; norberto.santana@uniontrib.com

Washburn: (619) 542-4582; david.washburn@uniontrib.com

The Blue Ribbon's final report and recommendations can be found on

SignOnSanDiego, the Union-Tribune's Web site, at www.uniontrib.com

Related SignOnSanDiego Services

Find San Diego jobs

Sign-up for SignOnSanDiego's newsletters

SignOnSanDiego's City Guide

Subscribe to the Union-Tribune

[Site Index](#) | [Contact SignOn](#) | [UTads.com](#) | [About SignOn](#) | [Advertise on SignOn](#) | [Make SignOn your homepage](#)
[About the Union-Tribune](#) | [Contact the Union-Tribune](#)

© Copyright 2002 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.