

Editorial: Broken-down watchdog

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Let's dispense with the euphemism that a racehorse "breaks down." What usually happens is that the animal's leg breaks, and it needs to be put to death (we'll dispense with "euthanized," too) on the spot. It's killed behind a curtain and whisked away in a van so the crowd doesn't have to see.

There's a good chance that the jockey, going from 50 miles an hour or more to zero and falling down headlong five or six feet in a flash, is injured, too. Sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they're paralyzed. Sometimes they die.

Some of these episodes just happen. But some don't. Rather, they're the predictable result of two things in particular.

First, animals that shouldn't have been run in the first place are doped up with what are called, ironically, performance-enhancing drugs, often to relieve pain that should be a warning sign to keep them off the track.

And second, a state entity whose job it is to keep an eye on the horse racing industry is not doing a satisfactory job of it.

As the Times Union's Emilie Munson reports, the state Gaming Commission — the entity that oversees horse racing, casinos, racinos, the lottery and, starting this year, sports betting — is understaffed, with just a little more than one investigator for each of the state's 11 tracks. And, until now, it has operated in a bubble of secrecy meant to keep the public from knowing of a host of problems.

Investigations by the Gaming Commission's inspector general generated at least 15 reports on misconduct within the commission and two funds set up to support the state's thoroughbred and standardbred breeders. The findings included conflicts of interest among fund leaders who benefited from state funding and programs, and commission employees engaging in prohibited gambling — sometimes on the job.

Though the reports should have been public information, they were marked “confidential” and released only recently.

And hanging over all this, insiders say, was a message that came down from the administrations of Govs. Eliot Spitzer, David Paterson and Andrew Cuomo: Don't make waves.

If keeping investigations quiet, and maintaining a veneer that all is well in the industry, is supposed to help horse racing's image, it isn't working. A 2019 Reuters/Ipsos poll found that rising deaths of horses at race tracks left 62 percent of the respondents with a less favorable opinion of the sport.

And horse racing, remember, is just one of the Gaming Commission's many areas of responsibility. It's what's supposed to be the difference between a criminal gambling enterprise and legitimate gaming industry. There's every reason to be concerned that horses collapsing on race tracks are the canaries in the gold mine of gambling in New York.

To her credit, Gov. Kathy Hochul has called for more transparency in state government; making the commission inspector general's reports public was a good first step. Keeping information from the public isn't going to cover the problems in the industry and the failures of the Gaming Commission any more than a curtain on a track can hide the heartbreaking truth behind it.