The Next Domino

The CDC Monkeys and the End of Chimpanzee Experimentation

By Eric Kleiman

AAVS's Senior Policy Advisor reflects on three decades of fighting for primates in laboratories—and why the fate of the CDC monkeys feels like the beginning of another historic change.

One hundred thirty-two monkeys are waiting to find out where they will spend the rest of their lives.

These rhesus and pig-tailed macaques are the survivors of in-house primate experimentation at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which focused largely on HIV, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases. Last November, *Science* reported a stunning development: The CDC was ending this program.

This is the first time a government agency has ended its in-house primate experimentation, and perhaps the biggest primate news since the National Institutes of Health (NIH) accepted the finding that chimpanzees were no longer "necessary" for research. Perhaps even more stunning was what the CDC decided to do for the survivors: provide them with "safe, compliant, and humane long-term sanctuary." Their new home will be a major upgrade from the CDC's indoor housing, which was designed for quarantine and experimentation.

After decades spent fighting for animals in laboratories, I did not expect to see this in my lifetime.

But I have seen what can await animals once condemned to a laboratory. His name is Donovan. He was housed alone for years and endured more than 40 liver biopsies, 200 bleeds, and multiple gallbladder aspirations. These experiments began before his second birthday and continued until he was six years old. When he was three, Donovan almost died within minutes of a hepatitis C injection—which, like much of his suffering, never made it into the pages of journal articles that identified him by his tattoo number. Once described as cheerful, his temperament changed so dramatically that he beat his cagemate Sakari until they had to be separated. Donovan's story was among those documented in McClatchy Newspapers' award-winning 2011 series, "Chimps: Life in the Lab."

Unlike many other chimps, Donovan made it out (see page 8). He is living his best life at the Chimp Haven sanctuary, where he's described as laid-back, chill, easygoing, loyal, and always looking out for the other chimps in his group. He no longer lives in fear of the next invasive procedure.

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I feel a special connection with Donovan. I provided his medical records to McClatchy after a successful lawsuit I initiated against the NIH pried loose voluminous records for hundreds of chimps in New Mexico, exposing for the first time their widespread suffering in labs.

It All Started with a Phone Call

Public relations and campaign wizard Suzanne Roy called me in 1994 with a question I remember like it was yesterday: "Have you ever heard of Fred Coulston?"

At the time, we were colleagues at In Defense of Animals, and the Coulston Foundation was the world's largest chimpanzee laboratory. As a result of our campaign, the Coulston Foundation went out of business eight years later. As the *Albuquerque Journal* reported, the chimps "were saved by an intense campaign by In Defense of Animals" that involved using "whistleblowing veterinarians to prompt tough regulatory action." This caused Coulston's revenues to shrivel.

Coulston went under despite the government's best efforts. In 1995, the Air Force tried to hand the foundation 144 chimpanzees, descendants of Ham and Enos, who had flown into space ahead of Alan Shepard and John Glenn. Advocates mobilized, and I lobbied Congress in person, providing research on Coulston's record—including the fact that it advertised chimps for developing cosmetics and insecticides. But it was Jane Goodall's intervention that convinced Congress to require a competitive bid process for the chimps. Despite the lab's atrocious animal welfare record, the Air Force awarded Coulston 111 chimps in 1998, prompting a successful bid protest lawsuit—for which I filed two affidavits—that helped launch the Save the Chimps sanctuary.

With the amazing generosity of the Arcus Foundation, Save the Chimps was able to rescue 266 chimpanzees and 61 monkeys from Coulston's facilities after it went out of business. Other survivors, including Donovan, live at Chimp Haven.

That was the first domino. Coulston's shutdown was a historic victory almost no one thought possible, turbocharging the effort to end invasive chimpanzee experimentation entirely—a signal achievement in the history of animal protection.

Many of that campaign's lessons apply to the fight for the CDC monkeys. Although the CDC may have surprised me, some patterns haven't changed: Since the news broke last November, the research industry has roundly criticized the CDC's decisions with its signature mixture of gaslighting, hypocrisy, and conjecture.

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY CHARNIGA; PHOTO (OPPOSITE, TOP) © YOUM / ADOBE STOCK



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The Usual Suspects

The critics are led by six of the seven National Primate Research Centers (NPRCs) and a roster of the usual suspects, including the notorious for-profit primate supplier Alpha Genesis Inc. (AGI). The NPRCs and their allies attacked the plans for the monkeys in a May 27 letter to the CDC and in *Science* magazine. AGI also filed a complaint with the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which apparently triggered the bid process now underway to choose a sanctuary for the monkeys.

The CDC had initially announced it would send the monkeys to Born Free USA, a sanctuary that is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS) and a longtime recipient of AAVS support.

GFAS accreditation is not a rubber stamp. It enforces rigorous standards for animal acquisition, transport, social housing, veterinary care, quarantine, behavioral management, and lifelong sanctuary care. It forbids breeding, exhibition, and invasive experimentation.

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This didn't stop industry's attacks—actually, it probably caused them. In a letter to the CDC on June 17, AAVS accurately called the criticism alarmist and inflammatory. A University of Washington (UW) official actually told *Science* that if Born Free is "just going to throw all of these monkeys together, half of them could die."

In reality, this fight was never about Born Free's fitness. It is about the concept of retirement itself.

Physician, Heal Thyself

The calumny from UW—which has paid four animal welfare fines since 1995—that a *primate* sanctuary cannot be trusted with *primates* should be viewed in its hypocritical context.

In a July 2025 inspection report concerning the death of a geriatric monkey, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) found that UW had failed to give its attending veterinarian the appropriate authority to provide adequate care. The USDA has issued this citation only 20 times since 2014, across more than 15,000 research inspections. Tellingly, UW's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)—the internal body meant to ensure animal welfare—was one of only two directly implicated in undercutting the attending veterinarian's authority.

Yet just five weeks later, UW praised its deficient IACUC—which the USDA has cited in *six* inspections since 2014—in *Science* magazine.

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And in January 2026, a USDA inspector documented UW staff taking a still-living infant monkey to necropsy before discovering she was alive.

As for AGI: The company paid a USDA fine in 2017 covering multiple primate escapes. More primates have escaped since, including 43 in November 2024, which garnered international headlines. Later that month, 22 monkeys died from apparent carbon monoxide poisoning. *Science* reported it was likely the largest mass casualty event for primates in labs since 2013.

Physician, heal thyself.

To Retire or Not to Retire?

Critics of the CDC's initial decision claimed concern for the welfare of the monkeys when the agency announced its intention to send them to Born Free. In the May 27 letter, the NPRCs and their allies piously spoke of the animals receiving "the lifetime care they so richly deserve." But let's be real—many of these critics would just as soon have these monkeys back in invasive experimentation, as their records clearly show.

> The same rhetoric that opposed compassion when advocates freed chimpanzees is resurfacing today, and it is aimed at the same target: the door to freedom for these monkeys.

Indeed, a 2019 *Science* article on the research-versus-retirement debate contained this illuminating quote: "When you send an animal to a sanctuary, you're putting them in a situation full of question marks." The person who said that is now Director of Operations at UW National Primate Research Center.

Her long record includes criticizing the NIH for sending chimpanzees to Chimp Haven in 2016, criticizing legislation in 2020 that would have made it easier to retire animals from laboratories, and publicly attacking the CDC's Born Free decision this year. She is also former chair and current board member of the stridently pro-animal-experimentation group Americans for Medical Progress, which signed the May 27 letter to the CDC and strongly advocated for continued invasive experimentation on chimpanzees.

These are not the actions of someone applying a careful, sanctuary-specific welfare standard and finding Born Free deficient. They point to someone who opposes retirement—period.

One critic said it outright. In June, AGI told *Science* it would keep the monkeys in biomedical experimentation if the CDC transferred them to the company. AGI considers these animals an "invaluable domestic resource" that would be "forever lost" to experimenters if they went to sanctuary—a view shared widely across industry.

AGI filed a bid protest in July with the GAO that was dismissed three weeks later. This failed protest did succeed in further revealing industry's agenda: research, not retirement, for these monkeys.

There is also a grim symmetry in AGI's protest. The last time a bid protest decided the fate of government-"owned" primates, animal advocates filed it to keep chimpanzees *out* of a laboratory. This time, AGI filed it to keep monkeys *in* one. There is also one huge difference: The Air Force had no preference between research and retirement, and it awarded the chimps accordingly (111 to Coulston, 30 to Primarily Primates). The CDC's current plan is to fully retire all 132 survivors to sanctuary. This is what AGI has fought to prevent.

Indeed, AGI's protest dovetails with what industry truly fears. In 2019, *Science* reported that researchers worry even *discussing* retirement could put monkeys on the same path as chimpanzees, eventually disappearing from biomedical research altogether.

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Industry's bias against the idea of retirement manifests as criticism of sanctuaries. This reached an absurd height just months before the Institute of Medicine's groundbreaking finding in December 2011 that chimpanzees were no longer necessary for research. The Director of the Southwest National Primate Research Center—which spearheaded a taxpayer-funded propaganda campaign extolling the virtues of chimpanzee experimentation and also signed the May 27 letter to the CDC—told McClatchy that if he were a chimp, he would rather live in a lab than in a forested sanctuary like Chimp Haven.

Come again?

A person who ran one of the seven NPRCs told a national newspaper chain he would personally choose life in a lab over life in a sanctuary. That is the worldview of those now passing judgment on Born Free—a reflexive bias against retirement that colors the self-serving criticism aimed at the CDC.

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Animals as "Property"

Underneath the research industry's self-serving objections to the CDC lies a mindset—consistent with animals' legal status—that sees animals as property. Assets. Resources.

In 1997, during the Air Force chimpanzee divestiture process, the officer in charge told the *Wall Street Journal* that the famous Air Force chimps who blazed a trail in space for astronauts were "basically personal property. They're like a piece of equipment."

In 2005, I provided whistleblower information that led a New Mexico district attorney to file multiple counts of criminal animal cruelty against NIH contractor Charles River Laboratories. At the hearing, company lawyers told the judge the chimpanzees at the Alamogordo Primate Facility were federal property, and the state had no jurisdiction to enforce its own cruelty statute. It would be "very, very strange and anomalous," they argued, to let a state tell the federal government what to do with its own "property." You see, these chimpanzees—humankind's closest genetic relatives—were not victims of cruelty. They were "resources." Or "products," according to Charles River, which sells animals on its website under "Products & Services."

That same year, directors of the Southwest and Emory NPRCs made the same argument AGI makes now—that primates are a "resource." In an article for the journal *Nature*, they argued for continued chimpanzee experimentation. The title? "A unique biomedical resource at risk." More than 20 years later, both NPRCs signed the May 27 letter to the CDC that opposed retiring the monkeys to Born Free.

That is the worldview animal advocates fight. The monkeys at the CDC are not

resources or assets on some hellish balance sheet. They are individuals—and that's what industry finds so frightening.

If these primates are individuals who deserve "safe, compliant, and humane long-term sanctuary," then so were the ones who came before—and so are the 106,430 held or used in US laboratories today. So are the millions of other individuals from other species used in labs.

An Existential Threat

The research industry is fighting even harder now than it did for continued experimentation on chimpanzees, insisting there is a *shortage* of monkeys where it once claimed there was a *surplus* of chimps.

That contrast reveals why industry views retirement for monkeys as an existential threat.

In the 1970s, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) launched a breeding program, sending chimps from New Mexico to government labs—including the CDC in Georgia—for invasive experimentation. Coulston bred Donovan under that FDA contract, under which hundreds of young chimps endured intensive infectious disease experiments. Several years later, the NIH launched its Chimpanzee Breeding and Research Program (CBRP), betting the animals would be a good "model" for AIDS.

That bet failed. But after spending a geyser of tax dollars to breed and infect them, the government produced hundreds of infant chimpanzees who would need lifetime care—and later expected a far-less-endowed humane community to clean up the mess.

> That admission did not stop powerful industry forces, including the NIH and the NPRCs, from claiming chimpanzees were vital to research. But it did mean ending chimpanzee experimentation was never an existential threat to the research enterprise.

In 1990, the NIH itself acknowledged the supply of chimpanzees exceeded the research demand.

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With monkeys, industry's self-serving complaints of scarcity have endured since the early 1980s. In 2023, a government report claimed the supply of primates is at a crisis point. In the 2019 *Science* article about the research-versus-retirement debate, a Yale researcher who writes for a pro-experimentation blog flatly declared that she knew of no monkeys not needed in biomedical research. She said, "There's no such thing as a surplus monkey." She even called the decision to retire chimpanzees to sanctuaries a mistake—one she fears is being repeated with monkeys.

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Industry is not really arguing Born Free is inadequate. It is arguing that no monkey should ever leave a lab.

When invasive chimpanzee experimentation ended, roughly 1,500 chimps were housed in a small number of facilities in the US; only five institutions were part of the CBRP. In fiscal year 2025, US research facilities reported 106,430 primates used or held across dozens of institutions.

Decades ago, industry fought hard to continue experimenting on a comparatively small number of chimpanzees. With so much more at stake, it views the loss of even 132 CDC monkeys as the leading edge of something far larger.

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Could Donovan's story be one for all primates in labs?

If the government sees ex-CDC monkeys thriving in a "safe, compliant, and humane long-term sanctuary" as a viable solution, it becomes easier to retire the animals at the next lab—and the lab after that.

The research industry understands this perfectly well, which is why its reaction has been so loud, so organized, and so revealing.

A UW official told *Science* in May that sending the monkeys to Born Free sets a "horrible precedent"—while AGI gave the game away regarding industry's true agenda. AAVS's disagreement with UW, AGI, and their ilk could not be more profound. The CDC's current plan to fully retire the monkeys to sanctuary could be the next wave of the ethical sea change that began with ending invasive experimentation on chimpanzees. As the Department of Health and Human Services said in May: "Compassion is making a comeback."

So are dominos.

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Editor's note: As this went to press, the CDC weakened the requirements for sanctuary, making it possible for research facilities to bid provided they do not experiment on these specific monkeys. AAVS will continue to closely monitor the situation.

