

It's 10 p.m. Do You Know Where Your Dog And Cat Are?

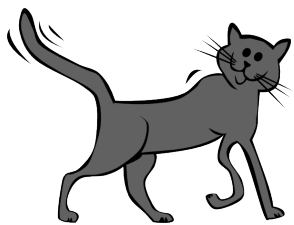
Summary

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) received complaints about Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS), formerly Sonoma County Animal Care and Control, located near the Sonoma County Airport in northwest Santa Rosa. The complaints expressed concerns about the welfare of the animals and the professionalism of the staff. The Grand Jury found that SCAS management and staff are working diligently and effectively to keep up with increasingly higher standards in medical, behavioral, and humane animal care. A dedicated volunteer corps enables SCAS to meet and maintain these standards.

SCAS is the animal control agency for the cities of Santa Rosa and Windsor and the unincorporated areas of the County. From July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013, SCAS provided services for almost 5000 animals with 76 percent of them released to current or new owners or to other animal-care groups. The number of adoptable animals far exceeds the number of available homes. Long-term sheltering is not a solution, either for the animal or for the County.

The Grand Jury investigated SCAS and found that it has programs to limit the growth of the County's population of stray and unwanted dogs and cats. The Love Me/Fix Me mobile clinics offer low-cost spay and neuter surgeries and related services in various County locations. The Free Mom Spay program spays female cats and dogs whose litters are being relinquished to SCAS for adoption. The Community Cat Love Me/Let Me Stay program focuses on the feral cat population.

Feral cats are difficult, if not impossible, to domesticate, making most of them unsuitable for adoption. In the past, most feral cats brought into the shelter were euthanized. Love Me/Let Me Stay encourages citizens to trap feral cats, have them neutered or spayed, and return them to where they were found.

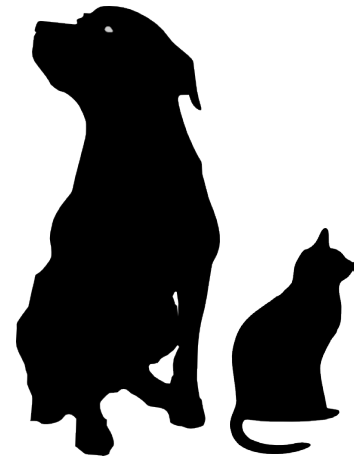


SCAS believes that healthy stray cats will eventually reunite with their owners if left alone. It no longer picks up or accepts them. Only 2 percent of lost cats are reclaimed by their owners. SCAS does accept stray cats that are sick, injured or otherwise at risk.

SCAS holds stray dogs at least ten days before evaluating their suitability for adoption. In the interim, volunteers, who do most of the dog walking, cannot interact with them because SCAS has not evaluated the dogs' behavior. Therefore, unclaimed dogs receive less exercise and socialization, and any behavior problems tend to worsen. Only about 25 percent of stray dogs are reclaimed.

SCAS discourages owners from surrendering animals with no advance notice to the shelter. To encourage owners to consider other options, SCAS imposes a seven-day waiting period. Exceptions are made for animals at risk of abandonment or physical harm.

SCAS follows the euthanasia guidelines known as the Asilomar Accords, developed by animal-care professionals and advocates in 2004. All SCAS euthanasia procedures must be approved by the Director and performed by licensed or certified staff professionals.



Background

The Grand Jury received complaints about the care and welfare of animals housed at the SCAS facility, staff qualifications, and its general policies and procedures concerning animal care.

Approach

The Grand Jury interviewed the complainants, staff from the County Health and Human Services Department, and SCAS staff and volunteers. It toured the shelter facility and reviewed job descriptions, procedure manuals, and the SCAS website. The Grand Jury also analyzed various SCAS policy documents as well as state and County regulations and ordinances.

Discussion

In 2013, SCAS experienced a major change in leadership when the Director suddenly resigned on June 4. An interim Director was appointed and a new Director began work on September 18.

SCAS continues its previous policies to reduce euthanasia, increase the rate of pet retention by owners, and promote the Community Cat program for feral cats. SCAS provided services for nearly 5000 animals in fiscal year 2012-2013, with 76 percent of them released to owner, adopted, placed in foster care, or transferred to other animal-care organizations. Within the next three years, SCAS aims to raise this figure to 95 percent, reducing the use of euthanasia to control the high number of unwanted animals.

SCAS offers programs designed to limit the County's population of stray and homeless animals over the long term. The Love Me/Fix Me mobile van provides low-cost spay and neuter clinics throughout the County. More than 2400 surgeries were performed in 2013, and SCAS aims to double this figure in 2014. A monthly calendar on the SCAS website shows the dates and locations of the clinics. Advance appointments are required. The Free Mom Spay program targets female dogs and cats whose owners are surrendering their litters to SCAS for adoption. Litters must be at least two months old when surrendered.

Feral cats are very difficult to domesticate, making them unlikely candidates for adoption. In the past, most feral cats were euthanized. The Community Cat Love Me/Let Me Stay program offers an alternative. Residents are encouraged to trap feral cats, take them to Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County to be fixed, and return them to the place they were found. Forgotten Felines, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the care and control of feral cats, gives tips on trapping the cats and provides spay and neuter services.



An overcrowding problem with cats has led SCAS to stop routinely picking up or accepting the surrender of healthy stray cats. The assumption is that wandering cats will eventually return home. Only 2 percent of lost cats taken in by SCAS are reclaimed by their owners. SCAS does accept stray cats that are sick, injured or otherwise considered at risk.

For stray dogs entering the shelter, the law mandates a 72-hour holding period for owners to pick up their animals. This period does not include the day the animals enter or leave the shelter and the days the shelter is closed. About 25 percent of lost dogs taken in by SCAS are reclaimed. To accommodate owners who want their dogs but delay picking them up, SCAS has held dogs up to a month. This hold status delays the dog's behavioral evaluation, which limits its exercise and socialization. Volunteers, who do most of the dog walking, cannot interact with an unevaluated dog because it could put them at risk. The hold period aggravates any pre-existing behavioral problems that a dog may have.

In the past, SCAS permitted an owner to relinquish an animal on a walk-in basis with no advance notification. The policy adopted in 2013 requires an owner to make an animal-surrender appointment with a waiting period of seven days. During that week, a counselor discusses other options with the

owner. This policy has changed the minds of some owners, but its long-term impact is unknown. Exceptions to this policy can be made for animals that might be abandoned or physically harmed.

Staff and volunteers walk and socialize dogs awaiting adoption. Information cards kept on kennel doors indicate the dates and times of the walks as well as notes on the dogs' behavior. Volunteers provide many valuable services to SCAS. In addition to walking dogs, they socialize with the cats, assist with laundry duties, foster animals, clean the kennels, work at fundraisers, and provide customer service, as well as performing other tasks.

The field-based Animal Control Officers' vehicles are now equipped with laptops, which are linked to SCAS software. New microchip scanners have replaced outdated, malfunctioning scanners. When officers pick up a microchipped stray, they scan the information into the laptop. Sometimes they can identify the owner and take the pet to its home rather than to the shelter. SCAS software also links to Pet Harbor, a popular website for owners seeking lost pets, rescue groups, prospective foster homes, and potential owners nationwide. The SCAS website features photos and detailed descriptions of the shelter's stray and adoptable animals.



The Love Me/License Me program urges dog owners to license their dogs as required by law. Licensing is an obvious way of matching lost pets to owners. The program provides revenue to SCAS and lessens its dependency on public funds.

SCAS faces challenges in treating animals with serious behavioral issues. Behavioral issues may make an animal unsuitable for adoption and long-term confinement can cause them to become "kennel crazy." Under pressure from animal-rights advocates who attack shelters for practicing euthanasia under any circumstances, SCAS keeps questionable dogs kenneled for extended periods.

The decision to euthanize an animal requires the SCAS Director's approval. SCAS uses guidelines known as the Asilomar Accords, developed by animal-care professionals and advocates in 2004. The veterinarian, animal health technicians, supervising animal control officers, and the animal control officers are certified to perform euthanasia.

A professional animal behaviorist, who evaluates and rehabilitates dogs, would help SCAS determine if a dog is dangerous or beyond rehabilitation. SCAS does not have such a position. A professional behaviorist could also give prospective owners a clear idea of the dog's condition as well as advice for retraining. This guidance would increase the chances for successful, long-term adoption. SCAS recognizes the need for a professional behaviorist and hopes that the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors will authorize the position on a full-time basis.

On an unscheduled tour of SCAS, the Grand Jury observed a well-maintained facility. The dog kennels were large and clean. The animals appeared to be in good condition and well cared for by the staff. A large number of volunteers were on site. The office area is small and crowded. The cramped conditions are not only uncomfortable but also hamper SCAS's ability to accommodate the occasionally high numbers of customers, volunteers, and animals.

Findings

- F1. When owners delay picking up their pets from Sonoma County Animal Services, the resulting increase in the holding period adversely affects the animals' health.
- F2. Sonoma County Animal Services programs to decrease the unwanted animal population through spay and neuter services appear to be effective.
- F3. A professional animal behaviorist can evaluate the possibility of successful rehabilitation of borderline-adoptable dogs and prescribe the best course of action.
- F4. Sonoma County Animal Services lacks sufficient office space.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. Sonoma County Animal Services enforce a firm deadline for owners to retrieve their animals or relinquish them for adoption.
- R2. Sonoma County Animal Services continue and expand its spay and neuter services.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors authorize the position of full-time animal behaviorist for Sonoma County Animal Services.
- R4. The Board of Supervisors provide additional office space at the Sonoma County Animal Services facility.

Required Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- R1, R2 – Sonoma County Animal Services
- R3, R4 – Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

Bibliography

Asilomar Accords. 2004.

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Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the names of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.