



## The Sonoma County Grand Jury

### ANIMAL REGULATION DIVISION

June 4, 2004

#### Summary

The 2003-2004 Sonoma County grand jury investigated the Sonoma County Animal Regulation Division because of complaints received concerning the animal shelter operations and management. Additionally, in the spring of 2003, public controversy arose when certain animal shelter staff cooked and consumed an emu that was in the shelter's care. Shelter policy has since been changed to prevent this from happening to any animal.

The jury found that the shelter's management needed many improvements. Areas of concern were flaws in management performance and judgment. For example, the employee's heavy workload and fractured working relationships between volunteers and permanent staff have led to stressful working conditions.

The jury recognizes the shelter staff and volunteers for the low animal euthanasia rate as compared with other counties, but there is room for improvement. There were animals euthanized that should have been given to outside rescue groups. The low transfer figures, animals transferred to outside rescue organizations/agencies, indicate that the shelter does not fully utilize the resources of local and Bay Area rescue organizations.

The jury recommends that existing vacant positions (Veterinary Technician and Field Officer) be filled and that a new position, Assistant Animal Regulation Director, be created and filled. When the present Agricultural Commissioner retires this year, the jury recommends that the new commissioner demonstrate a passion for the welfare of animals and work closely with shelter management.

#### Reason for Investigation

The grand jury received two complaints, both alleging poor judgment and mismanagement of shelter operations. The complainants stated that the shelter was not "rescue friendly," meaning that too many adoptable animals were euthanized. Because the Animal Regulation Division had not been investigated by a grand jury since 1985-86, and because of several articles in a local newspaper criticizing the consumption of an emu under the shelter's care, the jury broadened its investigation.

#### Background

The Agricultural Commissioner is in charge of four divisions: Agricultural Commissioner Division, Weights and Measures Division, Animal Regulation Division and Agricultural Division. The Animal Regulation Division, with its volunteers and approximately 26 employees, is the busiest and most controversial. It enforces laws pertaining to domestic/farm animals and their

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### **Animal Regulation Division (continued)**

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care. Its jurisdiction covers approximately 1,500 square miles of county unincorporated area and by agreement Santa Rosa, Windsor, Healdsburg and Cloverdale. *This county division should not be confused with the local Humane Society.*

The division provides community education, maintains a licensing program, adopts out animals, spays and neuters animals, responds to complaints concerning cruelty, neglect and inhumane treatment of animals and euthanizes animals. The division's shelter is a modern, well-equipped facility with excellent veterinarian assistance. Shelter services are available to all Sonoma County residents. The shelter staff and volunteers care for animals, spay/neuter animals and screen animals for adoption. There are also many opportunities for volunteers.

The Animal Regulation Division must accept all animals brought to the shelter, unlike not-for-profit animal welfare organizations such as the Humane Society that can choose which animals to rescue. This broad responsibility stretches the shelter's resources. Animals deemed not adoptable are routinely euthanized.

### **Investigative Procedures**

The grand jury:

Toured the Sonoma County Animal Shelter

Toured the Mobile Animal Center (MAC) van

Interviewed the following Sonoma County personnel:

- Two complainants
- Shelter Supervisor
- Shelter Volunteer Coordinator
- Three members of the Volunteer Board
- Animal Regulation Chief Deputy (shelter director)
- Animal Regulation Field Supervisor
- Agricultural Commissioner and his assistant

Reviewed the following Sonoma County documents:

- Animal Regulation Division Organizational Chart
- Shelter budget information
- Shelter statistics
- Draft of the Mobile Animal Center (MAC) Program
- Animal care policies
- State and county rules and regulations as they apply to the Animal Regulation Division
- Animal Shelter Volunteer Board bylaws
- Newspaper articles and Letters to the Editor
- Various correspondence relating to the issues of this investigation
- Animal Welfare Advisory Committee minutes
- Shelter job descriptions from Monterey and Solano Counties
- Memo to Members of the Board of Supervisors from the Agricultural Commissioner, in response to comments concerning the Sonoma County Animal Shelter, July 17, 2003

Attended:

- "Paws For Love" (Volunteers' fundraising event)

### **Findings**

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- F1. The shelter staff and volunteers are very busy with animal intakes, adoptions, spays/neuters, euthanasia, care, maintenance and handling of animals. At times the shelter receives over 200 telephone calls a day on an inefficient telephone system.
- F2. Although there are approximately 175 volunteer members, a much smaller core group of about 25 is consistently active in shelter operations. The Volunteer Board meets regularly. It approves approximately \$3000 monthly, provided by fund raising events, for medical needs of shelter animals.
- F3. Daily management of the shelter is affected by an insufficient number of paid staff to adequately attend to emergency call outs, animal care and shelter needs. This means that some duties such as temperament testing and other adoption preparations are not thoroughly completed, forcing employees to take on responsibilities not normally a part of their job description. Routine is interrupted and lines of command and communication are blurred. The staff is working under stressful conditions because of unfilled positions and a number of employees on disability leave.
- F4. Disparate philosophies have created a rift between some permanent staff and volunteer members. This rift negatively affects day-to-day operations and interpersonal relations. The present management seems unable or unwilling to resolve these issues. For example, there are permanent staff members who are more likely to euthanize animals, whereas some volunteer members believe almost every animal should be saved.
- F5. Many shelter operational problems stem from poor communication between management and shelter staff. Interviews revealed that management's lack of appreciation for the staff and volunteers contributes to the daily stressful conditions at the shelter.
- F6. The Sonoma County Agricultural Commissioner previously proposed a new position of Assistant Animal Regulations Director that would help the shelter director to balance the demands of public service with day-to-day operations, but it was rejected by the County Administrator.
- F7. The Volunteer Coordinator is a paid shelter staff member and among his many duties attends all Volunteer Board meetings acting as a liaison between the volunteers and shelter management. In addition, a major responsibility of the coordinator is facilitating effective communication between volunteers and permanent staff. Several volunteers stated that the coordinator lacks appropriate organizational skills for the job and is an ineffective liaison between the volunteers and shelter management.
- F8. The shelter utilizes the assistance of inmates from the North County Detention Facility who require constant supervision. They perform basic maintenance tasks such as kennel cleaning, but may not always do an adequate job, which can result in unsanitary conditions that pose a disease problem to healthy animals.
- F9. The shelter's euthanasia rates are falling and are much lower than those at other counties' shelters. The following statistics were provided by the Sonoma County Agricultural Commissioner's Office for the year 2002:

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	<u>Counties</u>				
	<i>Sonoma</i>	<i>Santa Barbara</i>	<i>Solano</i>	<i>Tulare</i>	<i>Stanislaus</i>
<b>Dogs Euthanized</b>	759	1,174	1,771	4,430	8,028
As a % of Dogs Impounded	24%	68%	47%	75%	67%
<b>Cats Euthanized</b>	2,488	NA	4,107	1,852	9,375
As a % of Cats Impounded	60%	NA	78%	80%	88%

F10. In 2002, a very small percentage (3.5%) of dog intakes was transferred to another shelter or outside rescue group. For cats the figure was 3%.

F11. The volunteers with county assistance recently purchased the MAC van costing \$140,000. It is used for spaying/neutering, adoptions, public education, and caring for lost/injured animals when disasters occur. An effective spay/neuter program is a major component to reducing unwanted dogs and cats in the county. There are now written procedures for the MAC van operation, which were implemented in early 2004.

F12. A recent public controversy revealed that certain shelter staff prepared and consumed an emu that was physically under the shelter's care. Since this episode the shelter has implemented a policy that protects animals from being consumed. It requires all people who adopt livestock to be asked if the animal will be used for consumption, and if so, the adoption will be denied.

F13. Many licensed rescue groups/individuals believe that they are routinely overlooked as a source of help to the shelter. They perceive there is a lack of teamwork and cooperation between the shelter and themselves. It is their perception that shelter management has an unfriendly attitude toward them.

F14. The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), appointed by the county Board of Supervisors, is charged with advising the Board of Supervisors on matters relating to animal welfare and providing support to the Animal Regulation Division.

F15. The present Agricultural Commissioner is one of the many county department heads who is retiring this year.

**Conclusions**

Compared with larger county departments with hundreds of workers, the budget constraints to the Animal Regulation Division, along with employees out on disability, seem disproportionately severe. These issues may ultimately increase costs to the county because of on-the-job injuries, stress related disabilities, increased euthanasia rates, fewer animals spayed/neutered, deteriorating working conditions at the shelter resulting in less-than-adequate care, fewer rescues, and a smaller number of adoptions and fostering of animals.

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Low transfer figures show that the shelter does not fully utilize the resources of local and Bay Area rescue organizations and groups to maximize the number of live releases possible.

Management would benefit from training on communication issues to foster a cooperative working environment. This will require a positive attitude to a commitment to make changes for the better, to compromise, to accept training opportunities and to move from a divisive philosophy to one of cooperation.

**Commendation**

The shelter depends heavily upon volunteer contributions of time and money. The volunteers and staff should be commended for their effort spent in acquiring the MAC van for public education programs, for clinics presented throughout the county, and for the shelter's relatively low euthanasia rate.



**Recommendations**

- R1. Beginning immediately, the Agricultural Commissioner must fill vacant positions, especially at the critical Veterinary Technician and Field Officer positions. Until more staff can be hired, the commissioner should consider shortening the hours that the shelter is open to the public.
- R2. The Agricultural Commissioner must create a new position: Assistant Animal Regulations Director, whose responsibilities would include managing and coordinating personnel and daily shelter operations, establishing a more effective public relations program and improving staff training programs.
- R3. The Animal Regulation Division Director should install a more efficient phone system within one year to accommodate staff and better serve the public.
- R4. The selection criteria for the next Agricultural Commissioner must include that s/he work closely with shelter management and demonstrate a passion for the welfare of animals. This individual must be committed to increasing adoptions, spaying/neutering more animals and transferring more animals to appropriate rescue groups thereby lowering euthanasia rates.
- R5. The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee must become a stronger more independent advocate for the animals' welfare and the division's mission, ultimately leading to more animal adoptions and fewer occurrences of euthanasia. A good first step would be inviting representatives from local rescue organizations to serve on this committee.
- R6. The success, or failure, of the MAC van program lies in its frequent usage and high visibility of its scheduled services within the community it serves. As such, an immediate priority of shelter management must be to vigorously promote the availability of the MAC van and to aggressively utilize it throughout the county.
- R7. The shelter director must insure that the Volunteer Coordinator acquire more training on liaison skills, effective coordination of numerous tasks, and recognizing volunteers for their efforts on a continuing basis. Management must insure this training be put into practice, and documented by performance evaluations.

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R8. The shelter director needs to utilize all opportunities, especially the Internet, to publicize the shelter's many services.

### **Required Responses to Findings**

Agricultural Commissioner - F4, F5, F6, F7, F13

Shelter Director - F4, F5

### **Required Responses to Recommendations**

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors - R1, R2, R4

Agricultural Commissioner - R2, R3, R6, R7

Animal Welfare Advisory Committee - R5

Shelter Director - R6, R7, R8

"The greatness of a nation ...can be judged by the way its animals are treated."  
Mahatma Gandhi