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The 2024-2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

Release Date

Animal Services in Sonoma County

Separate and Not Equal

The Costs and Consequences of Decentralization

Photo of our three Honorary Jurors

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The Costs and Consequences of Decentralization

SUMMARY

In addition to approximately 480,000 residents, Sonoma County households include an estimated 113,000 dogs and 100,000 cats. Feral cats and other domestic and wild species add to the animal population. State law mandates that county and city governments provide humane care for animals and operate animal control programs to protect public health and safety. Because the entire state of California is a declared *Rabies Area*, every dog owner is required to maintain current rabies vaccination and licensing of their pet. Every county and city government must implement a Rabies Control Plan that includes ensuring availability of low-cost rabies vaccination, quarantine of dangerous animals, enforcement of licensing, and submission of dog licensing data to the state. Spay/neuter programs for population control are strongly recommended.

A citizen complaint prompted the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to investigate the Petaluma-based North Bay Animal Services (NBAS). This led to a broader study of county-wide animal services. The work was guided, in part, by a 2012 study of animal services and subsequent updates undertaken for the Board of Supervisors by the Department of Health Services (DHS). The initial report mapped existing services, identified best practices, and explored alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. It called for a task force to establish shared standards and resources and explore alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. The task force members failed to agree on recommendations for a governance model, oversight, shared resources, or standards. One respondent told the Jurors that after two years of sporadic work, the only agreement was on a logo. While the task force was ultimately disbanded, the Grand Jury found a high level of voluntary compliance with industry standards during visits to the Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) and the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS). Report updates have documented the continuous improvement of Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS). This public agency serves the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, the City of Healdsburg, and the City of Santa Rosa.

A discussion of animal services in the remaining third of the county is largely absent from recent county DHS reports. Mapping and evaluating agencies serving this area became a focus of the Grand Jury investigation. Jurors learned that Rohnert Park's municipal shelter also serves Cotati in cooperation with the cities' police departments. The City of Sonoma Police Department manages that city's dog licensing and sends animals to SCAS or Pets Lifeline when needed. NBAS is responsible for providing animal services to more than 20% of the county through contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma.

Evidence collected by the Jurors confirmed the complainant's allegation that a lack of city oversight is allowing NBAS to operate in violation of applicable laws and other terms of its contracts. The Grand Jury also confirmed the absence of oversight by the organization's board of directors. Its dog licensing rates are approximately half of the national average of 23% and are far below those reported by SCAS. It is placing animals in foster-to-adopt homes without prior,

or timely scheduling of sterilization. It fails consistently to report dog bites to the county health officer. It lacks an established role in the county's *Animals in Disaster Response Plan*. Shelter maintenance and operation fall short of industry standards specified in its contracts. Staff are over-burdened and under-qualified. Given the extensive reach of NBAS, these shortcomings are a matter of concern for public health and safety and are a source of potential liability for the cities it serves. The governments contracting with NBAS have failed to exercise their right and responsibility to ensure that NBAS is providing the services it has contracted to perform and that animals are getting services that are legally required.

More than a decade has passed since Sonoma County convened public and private partners in an animal services task force to identify a governance model conducive to uniform and cost-efficient provision of animal control and shelter. Shortcomings and inefficiencies in the current system include the inability to ensure county-wide compliance with state laws or to mount a fully coordinated emergency animal evacuation. Uneven license rates undermine rabies control and fail to secure funds needed for animal services.

Based on these findings, the Grand Jury strongly recommends that county and city governments and their non-governmental partners renew efforts to coordinate and standardize animal services throughout Sonoma County and adopt an effective system of oversight.

GLOSSARY

- ***Animal Control*** includes field calls by certified Animal Control Officers (ACO) and implementation of programs to comply with state law and local ordinances that require rabies vaccination, licensing of dogs, and provision of spay/neuter programs.
- ***Animal Control Officer/Animal Regulation Officer (ACO)*** certification requires completion of the 40-hour PC 832 Arrest and Firearms Course and three months of field training.
- ***Shelter Care*** includes the housing, feeding, tracking and care of animals, provision of veterinary care, and management of adoption programs.
- ***Foster-to-Adopt Programs*** enlist volunteers to care for and socialize animals to prepare them for adoption.
- ***Fear Free Shelter Certification*** is a program designed to minimize stress and optimize the safe handling of shelter animals. <https://fearfreepets.com/fear-free-certification-overview/>
- ***Community/feral cats*** are cats with no acknowledged owner. Government agencies are responsible for managing the cat population through accessible, free spay/neuter programs.
- ***TNR*** is the acronym for *Trap/Neuter/Return*, a program in which cats in feral cat communities are trapped, sterilized and vaccinated, and then returned to the community.
- ***Rabies Area*** means any area determined by the California Public Health and Safety Director where the existence of rabies constitutes a public health hazard. As a rabies area, Sonoma County and its city governments must comply with California's Health and Safety Code.
- ***NGO*** is the acronym for a non-government organization.

- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** is a legal agreement that specifies responsibilities, obligations, and privileges between entities.
- **A Joint Powers Agreement (JPA)** is a legal contract between two or more public agencies, like cities or counties, that allows them to cooperate on shared services or powers. These agreements enable agencies to combine resources and expertise to achieve goals that might be difficult or impossible for a single agency to accomplish alone.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury visited the shelters, reviewed animal data, budgets, websites, service contracts, city council minutes and memoranda and coverage provided by print and social media. The Grand Jury researched industry standards for animal care and shelter design and interviewed the complainant, other NBAS clients, and representatives from the following organizations:

- Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS)
- Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC)
- North Bay Animal Services (NBAS)
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS)
- The Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Healdsburg, Rohnert Park, Sonoma, Sebastopol, Petaluma, and Santa Rosa
- The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

BACKGROUND

A citizen complaint regarding North Bay Animal Shelter (NBAS) prompted this investigation by the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury. Among the alleged shortcomings were unacceptable shelter conditions and failure to comply with state laws that mandate humane care, vaccination and licensing of dogs, quarantine and tracking of dangerous animals, and spay/neuter surgery of animals prior to placement in foster or adoptive homes. NBAS provides animal control and shelter services to four of Sonoma County's nine cities comprising more than 20% of its residents. Its contracts with three cities require that it comply with all relevant laws and that the Petaluma shelter shall be maintained in compliance with *U.C. Davis Standards of Care for Shelter Animals*. The current industry guidelines for standards of care (now used by U.C. Davis) are published by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians.¹ The fourth city requires that it perform at the *highest industry standards*. The complaint alleged multiple violations of these terms and an absence of city oversight to ensure compliance.

The Grand Jury broadened its focus to explore how Sonoma County and its nine city governments provide legally mandated animal control and care. Its approach was guided, in part, by a 2012 study of animal services and subsequent updates undertaken for the Board of Supervisors by the Department of Health Services (DHS).² These studies map existing services, identify best practices, and explore alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. In exploring alternative forms of governance, the 2012 study suggested

¹ <https://jsmcah.org/index.php/jasv/issue/view/2>

² <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5646253&GUID=DF621026-2216-4648-87CE-0C61C0A20014&Options=&Search=>

either a joint powers agreement (JPA) or a county-wide public/private partnership. It noted that without a mechanism for oversight, there would be risks of inconsistent service. The current situation with NBAS is evidence that this was a valid concern.

Subsequent reports have documented the continuous improvement of SCAS, the public agency that serves the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, the City of Healdsburg, and the City of Santa Rosa.³ Conspicuously absent from these reports was a discussion of what happens in the remaining third of the county. This omission became the focus of extensive research by the Grand Jury.

The Grand Jury also revisited recommendations that were made by the 2017-2018 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury in its report titled: *The Evacuation and Sheltering of Animals During the Firestorm of October 2017*.⁴ Through interviews and public documents, the Grand Jury determined that the recommended actions have been largely accomplished. The Director of Animal Services now serves as the animal liaison for emergency operations planning. An *Animals in Disaster Response Plan* has been annexed to the *Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan*.⁵ Several MOUs have been adopted, and others are pending with NGOs to specify their roles as emergency responders. Work is underway to establish a regional partnership encompassing Sonoma, Marin, Napa, Lake, and Mendocino Counties. Agreements are in place with *Code 3 Associates*⁶ and the American Association of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Regrettably, not all cities have developed municipal emergency response plans and NBAS has no defined role as the agency responsible for animal control for four of the County's nine cities.

Provision of animal care and compliance with state and local animal regulations is a large and growing challenge for city and county governments. A *Forbes report of pet ownership* found that some 66% of U.S. households now include a pet. About a third of U.S. households have more than one pet.⁷ Based on the *Pet Ownership Calculator* provided by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, Sonoma County is home to approximately 113,000 dogs and 100,000 pet cats.⁸ Feral cats and other domestic and wild animals add to this population.

A study by *Pew Research* found that 51% of respondents consider their companion animals to be members of the family, but along with the benefits of companionship and comfort come responsibilities both for owners and for county and city governments. These responsibilities are codified in state, county, and municipal codes that require humane treatment of animals and address risks that dogs pose for public health and safety (See Appendix A). County and city governments are responsible for enforcement of these laws through their designated Animal Control Officers.

Since 1987, detection of endemic rabies among bats and small mammals has caused every California county to be declared a *Rabies Area*. In 2024, the virus was detected in Sonoma County bat and fox populations. In a *Rabies Area*, dog owners and county and city governments are required to comply with legal obligations set forth in the Food and Agricultural section of

³ <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5646253&GUID=DF621026-2216-4648-87CE-0C61C0A20014&Options=&Search=>

⁴ <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grandjuryanimalservicesreport5-30-18.pdf>

⁵ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/administrative-support-and-fiscal-services/emergency-management/plans>

⁶ <https://code3associates.org/>

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics>

⁸ https://www.cdffa.ca.gov/AHFSS/Animal_Health/eprs/docs/pet_ownership_calculator.pdf

California Government Codes, the Penal Code, Civil Code, the Corporations Code, and Health and Safety Code.

Laws Governing Animal Services

Penal Code §597 requires each county and city government to ensure that all animals in its jurisdiction are treated in a humane manner.

Health and Safety §121690 (a) requires pet owners to maintain current rabies vaccinations for dogs over three months of age and license dogs over the age of four months. Licensing is the mechanism to ensure timely rabies vaccination. Animal control agencies enforce this law. The county health officer is required to collect county-wide data and submit reports to the state to document the level of county-wide licensing compliance. A Sonoma County Ordinance also requires vaccination of cats although licensing is optional except for the City of Rohnert Park.

Health and Safety §121690 (f) (1) requires each county or city government to provide dog vaccination clinics or arrange for dog vaccination at clinics operated by veterinary groups or associations for a charge not to exceed the actual cost.

California Code of Regulation §2606.4 sets forth vaccination and licensing procedures and reporting requirements for any city or county government in a declared rabies area.

Food and Ag §30503 mandates that no public animal control agency or shelter, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shelter, humane society shelter, or rescue group shall sell or give away to a new owner any dog or cat that has not been spayed or neutered. (A veterinarian may approve a temporary delay when required by the dog's health.)

While not required by the state mandated rabies control plan, Sonoma County recognizes the role of spay/neuter programs to reduce the population of unowned and stray animals that are less likely to be vaccinated and more likely to roam, fight or bite, potentially spreading rabies. The county mandates sterilization of pit bull breeds and of dogs running at large.⁹ SCAS supports spay/neuter for low-income pet owners and partners with Forgotten Felines to spay/neuter Community Cats through its Trap/Neuter/Return program.¹⁰

A table is provided in Appendix A that summarizes animal-related regulations referenced in this report.

Industry Standards for Shelter Facilities and Care of Shelter Animals

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians publishes *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters* which are widely accepted as industry standards. Best Practices cited in the Sonoma County 2012 Animal Services Report are based on the first edition of this document which was produced with input from U.C. Davis shelter veterinarians.

In making assessments of animal care and shelter management and maintenance during shelter visits, Jurors referenced the 2022 Second Edition of the guidelines¹¹ and a 2023 Checklist of Key

⁹https://library.municode.com/ca/sonoma_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH5SOCOANREOR_ARTXI_VMASPNEALDORULAALPIBU_S5-170MASPNEALDOLA#:~:text=Article%20XIV.%20%2D%20Mandatory%20Spay%20and%20Neutering,Running%20At%20Large%20and%20All%20Pit%20Bulls.

¹⁰ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/health-and-human-services/health-services/divisions/public-health/animal-services/spay-and-neuter>

¹¹ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/health-and-human-services/health-services/divisions/public-health/animal-services/spay-and-neuter/www.aspcapro.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/asvguidelinessecondedition-2022.pdf>

Statements.¹² Each of the 553 actionable statements made in this 64-page document is presented as *unacceptable*, *must*, *should*, or *ideal*. The statements are presented in 13 sections covering all aspects of shelter care. The Grand Jury focused on statements where compliance could be assessed based on physical inspection, interviews, or document review.

An over-arching admonition made throughout the shelter standards is that "...Operating beyond an organization's capacity for care is *unacceptable*." Certain other statements, paraphrased below, are included in multiple sections of the guidelines:

Animal Care

- A formal relationship with a veterinarian *must* be in place to ensure oversight of medical and surgical care in the shelter.
- Veterinarians *should* be integrally involved with development of the shelter's development and updates to written policies and protocols for animal care.
- Each animal *must* receive at least a cursory health assessment by trained personnel at intake to check for signs of infectious disease or problems that require emergency care.
- Medical, surgical, and behavioral services for foster animals *must* be provided in a manner that promotes animal welfare and minimizes length of stay (at the shelter).
- Shelters *must* have comprehensive protocols in place for recognizing and mitigating stress and associated negative emotions including fear, anxiety, and frustration.
- Foster care providers *should* be given clear instructions about how and when to access emergency and after-hours care.
- Shelters *should* sterilize all animals before adoption or ensure that they will be sterilized after their outcome. [NOTE: In California this is mandated by Food and Ag §30503.]

Shelter Staffing

- Shelters *must* have adequate, qualified personnel.
- Shelters *must* provide training for each shelter task and continuing education *must* be provided for all personnel to improve skills and maintain credentials.
- Continuing education *must* be provided for all personnel to improve skills and maintain credentials.

Shelter Maintenance

- Written protocols for animal care and shelter sanitation *must* be developed and documented in sufficient detail to achieve and maintain accepted industry standards.
- Ventilation *must* be maintained at a high enough rate to ensure adequate air quality in all areas of the shelter including in the primary enclosure.
- Noise *must* be minimized in animal housing areas.
- All food *must* be protected from wildlife, rodents and insects.

¹² <https://www.sheltervet.org/assets/docs/2022-ASV-GL-Checklist.pdf>

- Shelters responding to disasters as part of a coordinated response *should* draft memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with their governmental and nongovernmental response partners.

DISCUSSION

Decentralization and Fragmentation of Animal Services

As dictated by California state law, Sonoma County, and each of its nine cities determines how it will meet California's animal-related regulations. The county and each city government is responsible for implementing its own Rabies Control Plan. Central to rabies control is legally mandated vaccination and licensing. The ten governments have set different license and service fees and fee concessions for animals within their jurisdictions. These fees are presented in Appendix B. The resulting patchwork of fees and concessions is confusing to the public. It complicates efficient, cost-effective license enforcement and collection of license fees. It's confusing to pay one fee when a friend in a nearby city pays another. Agreement among the county and city governments on a common fee schedule and online license management vendor would resolve these issues.

SCAS provides animal control and animal shelter services to 66% of Sonoma County's population. NBAS serves 21%. The remaining 13% receive animal control services through local police departments and shelter care through the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter, the Humane Society of Sonoma County and numerous private and non-profit organizations that provide shelter, adoption, and spay/neuter programs for Sonoma County pets. Among these, the privately funded Pets Lifeline, Dogwood, and Forgotten Felines stand out for their adoption programs and Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) work to reduce community/feral cat populations.

- Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS) operates within DHS to provide animal control to the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, and the Cities of Healdsburg and Santa Rosa. It also shelters pets from the City of Sonoma and is responsible for the full range of domestic and wild animals. It has overall responsibility for implementing the rabies control plan and emergency animal evacuations.
- North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma to provides animal control field services and shelter to more than 20% of Sonoma County.
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS) is owned and managed by the City of Rohnert Park. The shelter serves both Rohnert Park and Cotati in cooperation with the cities' police departments. Municipal funding is augmented by a non-profit foundation.
- The Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) cares for animals from Healdsburg, citizen surrendered animals from throughout the county, and transfers from other shelters. It operates a veterinary hospital that provides pet care for low-income owners, including low-cost spay/neuter surgery and routine vaccinations (but not rabies vaccinations). HSSC currently outsources animal control for Healdsburg to SCAS. It is primarily funded by private contributions and grants and is overseen by its board of directors. An MOU with the county for emergency response is pending.
- The City of Sonoma Police Department provides residents with animal control, including licensing. Shelter care is provided as needed by SCAS and Pets Lifeline.

Common Challenges to Animal Service Providers

This investigation and a review of Civil Grand Jury reports from nearby counties revealed animal services to be a costly, labor and facilities intensive endeavor. Several issues were mentioned repeatedly and were observed, to a greater or lesser degree, in Sonoma County facilities. Collaboration among the county and cities could ameliorate many of these challenges, which include:

- **Underfunding:** Animal services compete with other compelling needs for public tax dollars. Limited county and city funds are augmented by license and service fees and fines. Collection of these fees can be difficult and time consuming for staff.
- **License Enforcement:** License compliance is important, both for rabies control, and because it generates needed income, but agencies struggle to achieve high rates of compliance. A study conducted by the on-line license management vendor, DocuPet, found an average nationwide compliance rate of only 23%. The highest rate found by the Grand Jury was 50%. In Sonoma County, 2024 rates range from 12% to 31% as shown in Appendix C. Among the obstacles to improved licensing compliance that were identified by DocuPet was a lack of public outreach to explain: 1) the importance of vaccination and licensing for rabies control; 2) the legal requirement for owners to license their dogs; and 3) the benefit of returning a lost pet regardless of where it has wandered.
- **Aging Facilities:** Constant maintenance and costly upgrades are required to ensure that aging facilities meet the health and safety needs of animals, staff, and visitors. Operating in aging, outgrown facilities makes daily operations more difficult.
- **Insufficient Veterinary Services:** A nationwide veterinarian shortage limits access to needed professional care, including affordable rabies vaccination and spay/neuter clinics that are mandated for public safety and population control. Demand has driven up costs and reduced availability of pro bono services.
- **Insufficient Staffing and Personnel Turnover:** Shelter staff are stretched to accomplish a wide range of duties, ranging from animal care to data entry, website management, license management, and interaction with the public. Understaffing and turnover of experienced staff and volunteers requires effective recruitment, supervision, and training and professional development programs that can exceed organizational capacity.
- **Public Demands for “No Kill” Outcomes:** Public sentiment can fail to recognize differences between private agencies that can limit acceptance to adoptable animals and public shelters that are obligated to accept animals regardless of medical or behavioral issues that may preclude live outcomes. The resulting negative impact on public perception can undermine needed support.
- **A Lack of Centralized Communication and Data Sharing:** Without the means to communicate and coordinate activities, agencies are hampered in meeting regularly occurring needs such as rehoming lost pets, coordinating responses to calls for animal control, and sharing knowledge and resources. It impairs the ability to prepare accurate state-mandated licensing reports, track dangerous animals, or mount a fully coordinated, county-wide disaster response.

Tax-Supported Agencies Providing Animal Control and/or Shelter

Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS) operates within the Department of Health Services to provide animal services to the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas and the Cities of Santa Rosa and Healdsburg. It also has an MOU to shelter companion animals from the City of Sonoma.

Scope of Service: In addition to companion animals, SCAS is responsible for farm animals, livestock and wild animals. As a government agency it is required to accept and manage animals regardless of their physical condition or adoptability. It enforces local, state, and federal laws that pertain to animal care and public safety. SCAS administers the state-mandated rabies control program which includes facilitating rabies vaccinations and managing bite reports and quarantine of dangerous animals. It engages legal services to handle cases involving animal bites and incidents of neglect and abuse cases. It collects and compiles license compliance data from all jurisdictions and submits county-wide reports to the state. SCAS is also the lead agency for animal emergency evacuation planning and coordination of emergency response.

Facilities: Demand for pet sheltering sometimes exceeds capacity of the 100-kennel shelter that was built in the late 1980s and was last renovated in 2001. It must also provide housing for a full range of domestic and wild animals. On October 6, 2015, the BOS approved funds for an assessment of the facility and design of needed improvements. After being interrupted by Covid, the design process is funded and underway. Projects will be done in phases starting with ventilation improvement and noise reduction in the kennels and upgrades to the entry area to enhance interactions with the public.

Staffing: Thirty-two full-time positions include certified veterinary technicians, ten licensed animal control officers, other specialists, and public service and operations staff. It has a contract veterinarian six hours/day, five days a week and hires extra veterinary services at times. It also has a network of veterinarians who volunteer in emergencies. Volunteers provide essential support for animal and shelter care. Volunteers, shelter staff and animal control officers have access to extensive training and continuing education.

Veterinarians, assisted by vet techs conduct intake examinations, care for sheltered and fostered animals and perform spay/neuter surgery. Animals are vaccinated at intake and are sterilized prior to placement in foster or adoptive homes. Low cost spay/neuter services are provided to community members though limited resources create long lead times for surgeries.

Revenue and Cost of Service: Seventy-five to eighty percent of the SCAS \$6.7 million budget comes from Sonoma County, Santa Rosa, and Healdsburg taxes. This is supplemented by collection of license and service fees and tax-deductible donations. Collection rates for service fees are low. Follow up is staff intensive. The SCAS Director estimated an outstanding balance of as much as \$2 million in service fees and penalties. As a county agency, SCAS is required to pay county salaries and benefits.

SCAS is nearing the end of a three-year contract with DocuPet for online license management. A \$25,000 annual payment covers collection of license fees and fines and all correspondence, including sending timely renewal notices. The SCAS Director reported that service has been so efficient that it allowed a reduction to license fees while achieving the highest licensing rates in the county.

The SCAS budget of \$6.7 million dollars provides an extensive range of animal control and shelter services for approximately 305,000 residents of Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, and

unincorporated Sonoma County. Santa Rosa's \$3,346,000 contract accounts for about 40% of animal control and shelter budget, or about \$191,000 per 10,000 residents.

Rohnert Park Animal Shelter is owned and managed by the City of Rohnert Park through its Community Services Department.

Scope of Service: RPAS provides shelter care for companion animals for both Rohnert Park and Cotati. The two cities' Police Departments provide animal control. RPAS has recently assumed licensing responsibility from the Rohnert Park Finance Department. It outsources license management to DocuPet and shares data with SCAS. DocuPet retains a small fee for each license. It maintains records and sends renewal reminders. Rohnert Park is the only city that requires cat licensing. Cotati offers a one-time voluntary cat license.

Facilities: Like other shelters, RPAS was built in the 1990s, but it underwent a major renovation in 2005 and has had many smaller upgrades. It is immaculately maintained with 35 dog runs, "flexible capacity" for cats, rabbits, and other small mammals. Designated areas for surgeries, food preparation, and laundry are clean and well-organized.

RPAS has earned certification as a Fear Free Shelter by implementing facility improvements and animal management practices that minimize stress and optimize safety for pets and humans. These include using sound baffles for noise control and minimizing unnecessary disruption that can lead to loud outbursts. Potential adopters view videos of available pets and meet those they wish to interview in a pleasant, private space away from other animals. Positive animal behaviors are reinforced with small treats. Instead of the frantic barking Jurors experienced in other shelters, they were met with calm, friendly, and noticeably more "adoptable" animals.

Staffing: Staffing includes the supervisor, who holds animal control, vet tech, and euthanasia certifications; a second vet tech; and a community service assistant. A contract veterinarian visits twice a week to provide animal care and perform surgeries. Every animal of required age or size is spayed/neutered and fully vaccinated prior to placement in a foster or adoptive home. Microchipping is free for Rohnert Park and Cotati residents. While the shelter offers low-cost spay/neuter services to its community members, the wait time for an appointment can be long.

Fifteen to 20 of the 100 volunteers schedule regular shifts to assist staff with animal care and shelter maintenance. Many more assist with special projects and activities such as adoption events.

Revenue and Cost of Services: The RPAS budget of \$565,000 provides a high standard of shelter care to a population of 44,000 at a cost of \$128,409 per 10,000. In addition to its municipal funding, the shelter benefits from an independent foundation that raises funds for shelter improvements and to support a variety of programs that support the community of pet owners. These include pet collars and leashes for newly adopted pets and Silver Paws funding to offset the cost of pet ownership for low-income seniors.

The Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) is included in this list of key agencies because of the limited tax revenue it receives through a contract with the City of Healdsburg to oversee animal control and shelter care. HSSC provides the shelter care and sub-contracts animal control. A \$104,000 animal control sub-contract with NBAS, that was near expiration, was terminated and a new \$114,000 contract with SCAS took effect on March 1, 2025.

Scope of Service: HSSC cares for animals from Healdsburg, citizen surrendered pets, and transfers from other shelters. Because it is not a government agency HSSC can be selective in its admission and focuses on adoptable animals.

Facilities: HSSC operates in an immaculate, well-maintained facility purposely built to a high standard of shelter design with donated funds. An adjacent building houses a veterinary hospital that provides pet care for low-income owners and offers low-cost spay/neuter surgery and routine vaccinations. It does not offer rabies clinics and does not manage licensing.

Staffing: HSSC staff includes veterinary professionals and development and communication professionals who manage its fundraising, community relations, and a website that provides a wealth of information on animal care and services throughout the county. Other staff provide maintenance, cleaning, and sanitation. Multiple well-trained volunteers are on site at any given time, interacting as team members with animals and staff. Training and continuing education are provided at all levels.

Funding: HSSC is primarily funded by private contributions and grants and is overseen by its board of directors. The Grand Jury did not pursue detailed budget information because of its focus on the county and municipal agencies.

The City of Sonoma Police Department provides residents with animal control, including licensing which is done on an in-person, walk-in basis. The licensing rate in 2024 was ~15%. Shelter care is provided as needed by SCAS and Pets Lifeline.

North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) was incorporated as a 501-(c)-3 organization in 2018 to operate the city-owned Petaluma shelter and provide the city with animal control services. It succeeded Petaluma Animal Services in this role.

Scope of Service: NBAS currently provides animal control and shelter services to more than 20% of the county's residents through contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma. It also contracts with Calistoga and operates the Clearlake shelter. Responsibilities include responding to field calls for domestic and wild animals, providing shelter and veterinary care for companion and small farm animals in compliance with industry standards, managing pet licensing and reporting data to the county, and complying with all animal-related laws on behalf of the cities it serves.

Facilities: NBAS rents the city-owned Petaluma shelter for \$1/year. The facility is aging and suffering from deferred maintenance. Shelter capacity was described as 40-50 dogs and up to 100 cats. The NBAS contract with Petaluma requires the non-profit to provide routine maintenance. The city is responsible for major repairs and improvements. In recent years, these have included roof work.

Staffing: The Director and eight staff serve the four Sonoma County cities from the Petaluma shelter and a storefront in Windsor. One Animal Control Officer is assigned to Windsor and Cloverdale. A second ACO works from Petaluma. The Executive Director is also an ACO who reported that calls are monitored 24/7. Shelter staff also include shelter technicians for cleaning and basic animal care, customer service, a social media position, one "coordinator" each for dogs and cats. No specific qualifications for shelter care of animals were listed either on the staff list provided to the Grand Jury, or on the bios that appear on the agency website.

Revenue and Cost of Service: Annual contract revenue totals \$1,233,000 from the four Sonoma County cities, with a combined population of 100,000. At only \$123,300 per 10,000,

this is even less than the RPAS budget that does not include the cost of animal control field operations.

Grand Jury Observations about NBAS Performance

NBAS's city contracts require it to comply with all applicable laws for animal shelters, including quarantine and tracking of dangerous animals, sterilization of animals placed in foster or adoptive homes, and enforcement of licensing/vaccination for rabies control. The Grand Jury identified significant failures to comply with these laws and other terms of its city contracts:

- Multiple professionals and private citizens stated that NBAS places unaltered animals in foster and "foster-to-adopt" homes and that appointments for legally mandated spay/neuter surgery can be delayed for many months. The Grand Jury obtained an email which confirmed that NBAS was aware of multiple similar complaints about delays in sterilization and vaccination.
- NBAS doesn't facilitate rabies vaccination. State law assigns responsibility for vaccination and licensing both to dog owners and every government jurisdiction. Cities are responsible for enforcing these laws through their designated Animal Control Officers, which is NBAS in the case of Petaluma, Cloverdale, Windsor and Sebastopol.
- Jurors were told that NBAS received 350 to 370 bite calls a year, but the Jurors were unable to secure evidence that legally mandated bite reports had been filed or that potentially dangerous animals were being quarantined as required by state law. This is a matter of concern for public safety and poses the potential for city liability resulting from dog bites.
- NBAS does a poor job of facilitating dog licensure and license renewal. NBAS licensing data for 2024 showed only 12% compliance across NBAS cities compared with 23% in Santa Rosa and 31% in unincorporated Sonoma County. (See Appendix C for licensing rates as estimated based on a state methodology.)
- NBAS advised the Grand Jury that animals are taken to one of several veterinarians when in need of emergency or routine care, so there is no supervising veterinarian in charge of animal medicine. The shelter has no single veterinarian contracted to consult on written protocols for physical, conditions, sanitation, or general animal care at the shelter.
- No NBAS staff member is identified as having had the training and oversight by a veterinarian that is required to conduct physical and behavioral assessment of incoming animals.
- Employees serving in the key positions of Dog Coordinator and Cat Coordinator were described as "experienced," but without any specific veterinary certifications included in their bios on the NBAS website.
- There is no documentation of training or continuing education of staff or volunteers.
- The workspace for food preparation observed by the Grand Jury is cramped and cluttered; open bags of pet food, some stacked on the floor, are accessible to rodents and other pests, in violation of shelter standards.
- During visits to the shelter, the Grand Jury experienced an overpowering foul odor that suggests that the ventilation system is unlikely to be providing air quality consistent with the health and safety of both animals and humans.

- NBAS does not have a written plan for emergency response. Nor does it have an MOU with the county to specify its role as an emergency responder.

NBAS is contractually required to maintain its facility either “in compliance with industry standards,” or U.C. Davis Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. The list above demonstrates that it fails to comply with industry standards for animal care, shelter management, and maintenance.

The NBAS Executive Director has an extraordinary—and unrealistic—range of responsibilities. The Director manages staff at the Sonoma County locations, the City of Calistoga, and a second shelter in Clearlake. Although NBAS reports 24/7 call monitoring, multiple sources noted that reaching the shelter and securing a response to messages is extremely difficult.

The Director manages the organization’s operations, its finances and shelter data. The Director is responsible for negotiating and fulfilling the city contracts, which include complying with all applicable laws and maintaining the shelter in compliance with industry standards.

The Director also maintains the agency website where essential information, including online pet licensing, is absent, out-of-date, or inaccessible due to broken links. License renewal notices are not currently being sent, reportedly because of the cost and staff time. Data provided to the Grand Jury showed that the number of license renewals fell from 1,816 in 2023 to 733 in 2024 resulting in a loss of revenue and undermining rabies vaccination enforcement. (See Appendix C for License Compliance data.)

Two or three of an estimated 40-60 volunteers assist staff during each of the morning and afternoon shifts. Unlike other shelters, the number of volunteers has reportedly not recovered since it dropped during COVID.

In short, the Grand Jury concluded that NBAS is extended beyond its financial and organizational capacity to comply with either its contracts or applicable laws, a circumstance which, according to shelter standards, is *unacceptable*. It is surviving despite a perfect storm of underfunding, an aging facility, insufficient use of veterinary services, and a staff that is too small, lacking in continuing education and relevant certification, and wearing too many hats.

City Oversight of Animal Services is Inadequate

Each of the four cities that contract with NBAS have failed to adequately monitor or evaluate the quality of service being provided by NBAS. None of these four cities can be sure they are fulfilling their legal responsibility to facilitate vaccinations, report dog bites to the State of California, ensure that dogs are licensed, or require that sheltered animals be spayed or neutered prior to release for adoption.

Since NBAS has been the animal services contractor, only one city official reported ever visiting the Petaluma shelter, and that was just once. Without periodic inspections, how can these cities be sure they are getting the service they are contracted to receive?

None of the city contracts require NBAS to submit reports that contain quantifiable performance criteria in order to evaluate compliance. How are the cities evaluating contract compliance without any reporting? Only Petaluma requires reporting (annually) to the City Council, and in the 7 years that NBAS has been the animal services contractor, only 3 reports have been submitted—the last one was filed in 2022. Some contracts specify an acceptable response time for calls for animal control, but NBAS does not track response time, and the cities are not requiring it.

Jurors questioned how contracts were awarded. It became clear that NBAS proposals offered a full range of services for prices below those of competitors. Most of the multi-year contracts, including one for 10 years, are for flat annual payments without escalation clauses to accommodate increased costs.

It is unsurprising that the cities did not question whether NBAS bids were sufficient to provide contract services. The low cost would be desirable *if* the terms of the contracts were being fulfilled. However, they are not. What the Jurors did not anticipate was the uniform lack of oversight and outright denial about NBAS shortcomings that was revealed in every city interview.

Each city official interviewed by the Grand Jury stated that they weren't aware of significant issues with NBAS. Based on multiple interviews, the Grand Jury confirmed the original complaint, that NBAS is operating with insufficient oversight by its board of directors or the cities with which it contracts.

CONCLUSIONS

- Most Sonoma County residents are receiving animal services that approach, achieve, or even exceed industry standards. However, this is not the case for the over 20% affected by city contracts with NBAS.
- The existing decentralization of animal control and shelter services and the lack of oversight by the county, the four Sonoma County cities with NBAS contracts, or by the agency's board of directors, has allowed unacceptable performance by NBAS to persist without intervention.
- The NBAS proposals on which its contracts are based promise an extensive range of services for a cost that is far below the budgeted costs of either SCAS or RPAS. The result is that NBAS is inadequately funded to fulfill its responsibilities.
- In recent years, as an underfunded and underperforming non-profit agency, NBAS has failed to provide animal services which are compliant with state mandates and contract provisions. The 2012 DHS report cautioned that insufficient oversight could lead to this situation.
- The existing fragmentation of services is inefficient and confusing for members of the public. It makes it difficult to know where to call in an emergency, or how to access needed services. Fees for licensing and services vary, as does the range and quality of information available on websites and the ability to contact a shelter or animal control officer.
- The lack of shared data and communication channels poses unique challenges for animal control agencies, the County Department of Health Services, and the Office of Emergency Management. It hampers compliance with legally mandated management and reporting of licensing data and the quarantine and tracking of potentially dangerous animals. It makes it more difficult for owners to locate lost pets. It can delay or disrupt response to emergency situations.
- Following a series of disastrous fires and floods, the County appointed the SCAS Director as animal liaison to participate in development of the Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan. In 2018, it added an animal disaster response plan with

defined procedures and established MOUs to define roles for key NGOs. NBAS is not among these partners and not all cities have developed such plans.

- Funding constraints and a lack of coordination among agencies leaves most municipal and non-profit shelters struggling to accomplish support functions that are essential to all such as timely license renewals and invoicing for fees, staff and volunteer training, and maintenance of websites to provide effective public outreach. Thoughtful centralization of some or all these functions could lead to improved, cost-efficient solutions, and increased revenue collection.
- Rabies control efforts are undermined by failure to achieve high levels of pet licensing and implement spay/neuter programs for population control. Failure to collect license and shelter service fees results in the loss of revenue to support animal services.

COMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recognized the steady progress achieved by SCAS to comply with best practices, and other recommendations contained in the 2012 DHS report. This progress is acknowledged in subsequent reports to the Board of Supervisors and is, in part, due to the Board's on-going oversight and support of improved animal services.

The exceptional volunteer and financial support provided to the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter by its community is testimony to the value of well-run, conveniently located facilities. At the Humane Society of Sonoma County, we experienced an independent non-profit shelter with minimal public funding whose public engagement and service on behalf of animals extends across city and county boundaries.

While our investigation did not extend to the dozens of private and non-profit programs caring for Sonoma County animals, we would be remiss not to call out the outstanding shelter and adoption services provided by Pets Lifeline and Dogwood and the exemplary work of Forgotten Felines to control populations of pet and feral cats. These non-profit organizations depend on the generosity and volunteer support of the community. Our hats are off to all those who care for the county's companion animals.

FINDINGS

- F1.** Failure by the county and its nine cities to adopt recommendations in the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report has left Sonoma County animal service agencies operating without shared standards, communication channels, data sharing or oversight.
- F2.** Services provided to the four Sonoma County cities by North Bay Animal Services are non-compliant either with state laws or industry standards for the care of shelter animals as specified in its contracts.
- F3.** A lack of coordination between SCAS and NBAS is an obstacle to a fully coordinated implementation of the county-wide disaster response plan for animal evacuations.
- F4.** Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for some agencies to provide effective training for staff and volunteers.
- F5.** Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for agencies to maintain websites and social media content required for effective public relations.
- F6.** Having multiple different fee structures for animal licenses and services is confusing to the public and complicates billing and collection of license fees and fines.
- F7.** Failure to achieve high levels of licensing in all government jurisdictions and provide access to shared information undermines mandated rabies control, makes it more difficult to return lost pets, and results in a loss of revenue.
- F8.** Based on SCAS data, uniform adoption of online licensing management through DocuPet (or a comparable vendor) would increase county-wide licensing rates and enhance compliance with state law.
- F9.** Failure to promote the benefits and legal requirement to license dogs, and failing consistently to send license renewal reminders, contribute to low license compliance and loss of revenue.
- F10.** Making centralized training resources available could enhance performance of animal services employees and volunteers.
- F11.** Insufficient oversight either by the cities or by the organization's board of directors has allowed NBAS to be non-compliant with state law and the terms of its contracts by: failing to effectively manage licensing and renewals; failing to offer legally mandated rabies vaccination clinics; failing to perform legally mandated spay/neuter of animals prior to placement; failing to consistently submit bite reports to the county health officer (through SCAS); failing to maintain the Petaluma animal shelter in compliance with industry standards; and failing to collect accurate data and provide reports that demonstrate compliance with contract terms.
- F12.** A lack of responsiveness to phone calls has eroded public confidence in the ability of NBAS to respond in a timely manner to calls for service or follow-up.
- F13.** While NBAS is responsible for general maintenance of the shelter, the City of Petaluma is not exercising due diligence with regard to facilities maintenance and repair, which may include an adequate ventilation system based upon the Grand Jury's observations during its visits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. By November 1, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to establish an Animal Services Task Force comprising county, city, and shelter representatives to revisit the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report and recommend a governance structure for animal services that will: 1) provide county-wide oversight to ensure compliance with State Law; 2) standardize fees and engage a common licensing vendor to enhance public health and safety, licensing rates and revenue, and; 3) achieve economic efficiencies through shared resources. (F1, F3, F4-F6 and F9-F10)
- R2. By January 1, 2026, each of Sonoma County's 9 cities will delegate one or more representatives to participate in the county-wide Animal Services Task Force convened by DHS. (F1)
- R3. By January 1, 2026, the director or supervisor of SCAS, HSSC, RPAS, and NBAS will commit to participating in the county-wide Animal Services Task Force. (F1)
- R4. By May 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to launch a county-wide public information campaign in cooperation with the cities to explain the legal imperative and benefits of licensing pets. The campaign will commence no later than July 1, 2026. (F7-F9)
- R5. By November 1, 2025, each city contracting with North Bay Animal Services will inspect and evaluate the shelter condition, and evaluate the shelter operation and animal control services, to determine whether NBAS is complying with legal mandates and other terms of its contract. (F2, F11-F12)
- R6. By September 30, 2025, each of the cities that contracts with NBAS will require quarterly reports that include data and performance criteria sufficient to evaluate compliance with its contract and all relevant laws. (F2, F11)
- R7. By November 1, 2025, the Petaluma City Council will direct staff to implement a facilities assessment of the city-owned shelter and submit a report of findings related to the adequacy of the HVAC system and any improvements that may be required for the health and safety of animals and humans. (F13)
- R8. By June 1, 2026, the City of Petaluma will correct any identified ventilation and/or other defects that put animal and/or human health and safety at risk. (F13)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the grand jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (R1, R4, and F1, F3-F10)
- Department of Health Services Director (R1, R4, and F1, F3-F10)
- The Cloverdale City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Cotati City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, and F1 and F3-F10)
- The Healdsburg City Council (R1-R2, R4-7, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Petaluma City Council (R1-R2, R4-8, F1-F3, F6-F13)
- The Rohnert Park City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Santa Rosa City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)

- The Sebastopol City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Sonoma City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Windsor City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that their comments and responses must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

INVITED RESPONSES

The Grand Jury invites the following to respond:

- Sonoma County Animal Services Director (R1, R4, R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Petaluma City Manager (R1-R2, R4-8, F1-F3, F6-F13)
- Humane Society of Sonoma County (R1, R3-5, F1, F3-12)
- North Bay Animal Shelter Executive Director (R1, R4-R8, F1-F13)
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter Supervisor (R1, R3-5, and F1, F3-12)

Responses must be submitted to the presiding judge of the Sonoma County Superior Court in accordance with the provisions of the Penal Code section 933.05. Responses must include the information required by section 933.05.

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APPENDIX A**Animal Related Regulations****ANIMAL CONTROL/SHELTERING**

Civil Code §1834	Depository of animals must provide food, shelter & veterinary care
Civil Code §1834.4	No animal shall be euthanized if it is adoptable
Corporations Code §14502	Humane Officers Appointment, Reappointment & Training
Food and Ag §30503.5	Dog bite disclosure
Food and Ag §31105	The taking up and impounding of all dogs found running at large
Food and Ag §31108	Provide for holding period for lost animals
Food and Ag §§31601-31626; §§31641-31646	Dangerous and vicious dog
Penal Code §597	Humane treatment of animals
Penal Code §599(d)	Policy on euthanasia of adoptable or treatable animal

LICENSING/MICROCHIPPING

Food and Ag §30502 €	Dog license tags provide for the keeping of a record to identity of the dog owner
Food and Ag §30652	Use of fees for issuance of dog license tags and fines
Food and Ag §31752.1	Cats: Microchip implants requirement
Health and Safety §121690 (a)	Owner required to license any dog over the age of 4 months.

RABIES & VACCINATIONS

California Code of Regulation §2606	Rabies, requires reporting of bites and quarantine of animals
California Code of Regulation §2606.4	Officially declared rabies areas along with requirement of licensing and vaccination; requires rabies control activities reporting
Health and Safety Code §121585	Definition of rabies area
Health and Safety §121690 (a) - (e)	Rabies Areas, licensing and vaccinations; duty of the governing body to provide for a rabies control program
Health and Safety §121690 (f)	Requires governments to provide rabies clinics

SPAY/NEUTER

Food and Ag §30503	Spay/neuter of dogs
Food and Ag §30503(a)(1)	Spay/neuter of dogs prior to adoption
Food and Ag §31751.3	Spay and neuter of cats prior to adoption

APPENDIX B

Dog License Fees*		
City/Area	Spayed/ Neutered	Intact Animal
Unincorporated County	\$16	\$19
Santa Rosa	\$16	\$19
Cloverdale	\$20	\$40
Healdsburg	\$15	\$30
Petaluma	\$20	\$25
Windsor	\$20	
Sebastopol	\$20	\$50
City of Sonoma	\$25	\$50
Rohnert Park (Dogs & Cats)	\$18	\$36
Cotati (Cats voluntary)	\$20	\$40
*Jurisdictions also offer different concessions, e.g., for seniors, veterans, or multiple pets.		

APPENDIX C**Dog Licensing Compliance Data**

Area	2023-24 Population*	Estimated # of Dogs**	2023 Licenses		2024 Licenses	
			#	%	#	%
Unincorporated	130,777	30,904	13,160	43%	9,726	31%
Santa Rosa	174,890	41,328	11,867	29%	9,629	23%
Total SCAS*	305,667	72,232	25,027	35%	19,355	27%
Cloverdale	8,710	2,058	617	30%	350	17%
Healdsburg	10,985	2,596	393	15%	282	11%
Petaluma	58,445	13,811	1,833	13%	1,488	11%
Sebastopol	7,295	1,724	230	13%	233	14%
Windsor	25,394	6,001	1,017	17%	822	14%
Total NBAS	110,829	26,190	4,090	16%	3,175	12%
Sonoma City	10,532	2,489	NA	NA	368	15%
Rohnert Park	43,821	10,355	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cotati	7,303	1,726	NA	NA	NA	NA
Total Other	61,656	14,570				
Countywide	478,152	112,992				
*Population data source: https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/estimates-e1/						
**Pet Calculator: https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/AHFSS/Animal_Health/eprs/docs/pet_ownership_calculator.pdf						
License data provided by SCAS and NBAS						
Note: NBAS contract with Healdsburg terminated 2/29/25						

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