

WE CAN DO BETTER... IMPROVING ANIMAL CARE IN ORANGE COUNTY

SUMMARY

Orange County Animal Care Services, a department of the Health Care Agency, serves a population of approximately 2.7 million residents and handles nearly 50,000 animals annually. Animal Care Services provides important and necessary services for the residents of the County. From dealing with stray dogs and cats to wild coyotes, from exotic animals to mountain lions, Animal Care Services plays an integral part in the daily lives of Orange County residents. The County operates one Animal Care Center (The Center) located at 561 The City Drive South in Orange.

The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury performed a study of the roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of Animal Care Services. This study sought to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Animal Care Services, and to determine whether the citizens of Orange County, are receiving the best service possible. The time frame involved is from March 1999 to May 1, 2000.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Critical articles that appeared in local newspapers and magazines in 1999 originally led the Grand Jury to make inquiries into the operation of Animal Care Services. Based upon the many interviews conducted and the review of numerous written materials, the Grand Jury has concluded that the Orange County Health Care Agency has made a number of significant changes and improvements in the leadership and operation of Animal Care Services. Further improvements are called for.

METHOD OF STUDY

The 1999-2000 Grand Jury toured several animal-care facilities, reviewed numerous reports and articles, and conducted many interviews to obtain information for this study.

BACKGROUND

An animal shelter should be a safe haven for all animals in need. It should provide quality care for all stray and relinquished animals staying temporarily within its facility and to make every effort to provide a safe, comfortable and stress-free environment. It should also present an inviting atmosphere to encourage the public to bring in stray and unwanted animals, and also to adopt a pet.

A shelter's mission should include preventing animal cruelty and suffering, enforcing animal protection laws, and helping the community develop humane principles. This service is exemplified in Animal Care Services' own mission statement, which reads:

The mission of the Orange County Animal Care Services is to offer refuge, medical care and the opportunity for a second chance for life to unwanted and abused animals in our community; to protect animals from cruelty or neglect; to foster a public sentiment of humanity and gentleness toward all living creatures; to encourage and promote responsible pet ownership; to reduce companion animal overpopulation through humane education and spay/neuter advocacy.

The goal of this report is to obtain a clearer picture of the level of success that Animal Care Services has attained in achieving the ideals outlined in its mission statement. The major topics, Administration and Training, Veterinary Services, and the Facility are discussed below.

ADMINISTRATION AND TRAINING

It is the obligation of the Center shelter administration to evaluate and revise current procedures frequently to ensure that animals are cared for properly by the staff. It should also verify that employees are competent, compassionate, and properly trained.

At the time of this study, the positions of Director of Animal Care Services and Chief of Veterinary Services are both vacant. These positions are extremely critical to the successful operation of the Center.

The Director of Animal Care Services is responsible for all areas of the Center, including Field Operations, Veterinary Services, Animal Services (kennel), and Office Administration. The Director position is in transition. At the time this study began, the Interim Director had been in the position for several months. In February 2000, a new Interim Director was appointed to the position while a search for a permanent Director continued.

The lack of permanent management and the resultant insufficiency of direction and leadership has had a detrimental effect on the Center's staff. While the majority of personnel have done a commendable job, there exists an obvious lack of emphasis on a responsive, courteous, and caring attitude when providing service to the public. Although many employees strive to maintain a positive attitude, there are too many exceptions, especially among the longer-term employees. This attitude is sometimes reflected in the care of the animals and in the staff's dealing with the public.

The Grand Jury has reviewed the Training Manuals and Policy & Procedure Manuals for kennel, field, and office staff. The training and procedures outlined appear adequate, but there is some concern that enforcement of these procedures is lacking. Specific situations regarding attitude, uniform code, officer safety, and treatment of animals became evident. For example:

- A poor customer service image is the result of discourteous, uncaring attitudes being presented to the public by some staff members. The kennel staff must be available and eager to assist potential adopting families to learn as much about an animal as possible prior to their taking it home. This assistance will reduce the Center's extremely high return rate of adopted animals. Improving the information relayed on the cards affixed to each animal's kennel and increased staff contact with prospective owners could provide specific data about each animal.
- Lack of adequate staffing results in substantial mandatory overtime and highly stressed employees. Insufficient kennel and clerical/window staffing during public service hours results in customer frustration, lower numbers of animal redemption and adoptions, and worker fatigue.
- The Grand Jury has concerns regarding field personnel fully complying with policies and procedures in the areas of customer-service attitudes, cleanliness of truck-holding compartments, and response time to citizen requests. These Animal Care Officers provide field services 24 hours a day. During periods of low staffing, calls are prioritized based on the severity of the complaint. Consequently, some calls that citizens consider significant may take a longer response time than anticipated. All of these issues result in reduced customer service and a diminished public image of Animal Care Services.
- The Grand Jury discovered employee morale at the Center to be low due to issues noted under Findings in this report. Employees must be able to discuss concerns and problems with management without fear of reprisal and to have counseling relating to the stress of their positions available to them when necessary. For example, an employee who is responsible for daily euthanizing animals may need to discuss feelings with a qualified counselor on a confidential basis.

A highly experienced Shelter Director is crucial to the success of the employees and the welfare of the animals. The Director must have a proven track record in implementing modern, aggressive policies and programs that will address the issues outlined in this report. In January 2000 the County reviewed the description and salary structure of this position and provided a salary increase to make the position more attractive. As of this writing, the recruitment search for a new Director is underway and several candidates are under consideration. Until there is adequate permanent management staff in place, many of the existing problems will not be satisfactorily resolved.

VETERINARY SERVICES

The Veterinary Services area of the Center has undergone many changes in recent months. Serious problems had arisen regarding the health and medical care of some animals, and these have been widely reported in the media. At the time of this report the position of Chief Veterinarian is vacant.

The Chief Veterinarian has responsibility for two staff veterinarians and five animal-health technicians, both in the Center clinic and the spay/neuter facility. The position description and salary structure for the Chief Veterinarian have been reviewed, and a search for a replacement has begun. Until an experienced Chief Veterinarian assumes the management of Animal Care Services, many of the problems outlined here will not be solved.

Based upon recent articles in the press and several interviews, situations have occurred at the Center that exemplify inadequate procedures.

- Untimely euthanization of animals. Current policy states that healthy, adoptable animals will be held for four days for owner retrieval, plus a 10-day public adoption period. Some animals are being euthanized before that time period has expired.
- Lack of proper assessment of animals chosen to be euthanized. A series of checks and balances are in place to ensure that animals chosen for euthanization are not owner-animals or that a hold has not been placed on that animal for adoption. These procedures are not being strictly followed as there have been instances in which the animals were wrongly put to death.
- Timely and adequate treatment for ill or injured animals. There have been reports that injured animals are not being properly medicated to relieve pain or given prompt treatment, and ill animals may not be treated for several days. Treatment plans have been drafted but have not been fully implemented.
- Severe lack of cooperation between kennel and vet staff. Center kennel staff have been encouraged to come forward to report ill or injured animals, but when they do, they are frequently met with resentment from vet staff for “interfering.” This is apparently a long-standing feud, and in many reported cases, the ill animal is left to suffer while the friction continues between staff members.
- Vets not making rounds on scheduled basis. The veterinarians are responsible for making scheduled rounds to observe the entire animal population, but reportedly are not. If the vets do not make rounds, decisions regarding medical care and treatment are often left to unlicensed veterinary technicians. It has been suggested that this is, in effect, practicing veterinary medicine without a license.

The mission statement of Animal Care Services states, in part, that the mission is to *offer refuge, medical care...to protect animals from cruelty or neglect....* The Grand Jury feels that it is reasonable to expect the Veterinary management to require this as a minimum standard for the entire staff. If a change in the public image is to occur, the staff must re-establish a sense of trust and confidence.

The Grand Jury has determined these other areas to also be of concern:

- Lack of monitoring of controlled substances. A report by the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association outlined an inspection of the Center which took place in March. Inspectors reported observing controlled drugs not in locked cabinets as required by law, but unsecured in a room where jail inmates were performing custodial duties. This is an extremely serious problem as there is the potential for inmates, as well as staff members, to take possession of these dangerous drugs. This is an issue that has been addressed by the administration.
- The spay/neuter program. The implementation of the Center's spay/neuter program was completed hurriedly at the time of the State-imposed deadline. A temporary surgery facility was established, and an experienced sterilization surgeon was hired. A specially designed surgical trailer has been obtained, but issues regarding its use, such as placement and staffing, have yet to be worked out. Concerns regarding the administration of the program are being addressed by the Health Care Agency.
- Procedures for recognition and treatment of illnesses. A much-publicized epidemic of feline panleukopenia (distemper) has demonstrated the need for faster evaluation of animals upon receipt at the Center. Animals suspected of being ill with communicable diseases must be immediately isolated and tested to stop the spread of disease. New procedures for vaccination and housing of cats are now in place, and current methods of medical evaluation must be assessed for all animals.
- Euthanasia procedures must be humane for animals and safe for center staff. In 1999 nearly 15,000 dogs, cats, and other animals were euthanized at the Center. Shelters must demonstrate a respect for quality of life and provide the most humane death possible for sick, injured, or unwanted animals. Methods must also provide for the safety of Center staff at all times. Additionally, new techniques for the rapid and humane euthanasia of domestic and wild animals must be evaluated. Recent changes have taken place in the procedure for euthanizing cats. Further study is necessary to determine if the current method of euthanizing feral (wild) cats is the most humane.

Public Information and Education

The Animal Care Center has the responsibility of providing education about the humane care and treatment of animals to citizens of the County, especially to children. This may include sponsoring countywide awareness campaigns, pet-adoption days, cable television appearances to showcase available pets, and sending officers into classrooms for presentations.

The Center staff includes an Information and Education Officer who is responsible for ensuring proper public presentation of the animals. This officer's duties also include coordinating the volunteers at the Center, working with purebred rescue services, and creating information packets for new pet owners. The officer also works closely with schools, scout troops, and other children's groups to encourage involvement with the care of the animals.

This officer is responsible for providing the public with the best possible image of the Center and for developing a good working relationship with community groups within the County.

Advisory Board

The role of the Animal Shelter Advisory Board is to advise the Board of Supervisors on significant activities and issues affecting Animal Care Services/Center matters. The Advisory Board consists of a representative from each Supervisorial District and two additional at-large members. Meetings are held once a month where the public can address the Board with their concerns. Comments by members of the public are limited to five minutes per person, with a total time limit of twenty minutes for all public comments. Following each monthly Advisory Board meeting, minutes are sent to the Board of Supervisors.

The fact that these Advisory Board meetings are held is not well known to the general public. As a result, the people who attend these meetings are generally representing special interest groups, particularly animal-rights groups. It is important that the general public have input in developing the goals and policies of Animal Care Services, yet the general public appears to be left out of the process much of the time. Animal Care Services should consider methods of informing the public of the schedule of these meetings such as utilizing their web site, making postings on bulletin boards, and utilizing notices on cable television.

FACILITY

The Animal Care Center facility is aging badly and it does not provide optimal conditions for animals or staff. Plans for relocating the facility to the site of the former Marine Corps Air Station in Tustin are progressing. A new facility, designed by architects experienced in the building of animal shelters, should be state-of-the-art. As described, this facility will provide a larger, more modern facility with up-to-date lighting, security, and temperature controls. It will offer a pleasant, safe, and efficient environment for the staff members and the animals in their care.

RECENT CHANGES AND IMPROVEMENTS

In November 1999, the Department of Animal Control and Shelter was changed to Animal Care Services and the Animal Care Center, in order to present a more positive public image. During the time frame of the Grand Jury study of Animal Care Services, several other changes have taken place that will positively affect the animals and staff:

- A spay and neuter facility was acquired and an experienced surgeon was hired.
- Gang cages for cats were eliminated and new individual cat cages were placed in a newly built cat kennel.
- Procedures for recognizing and containing cat illnesses upon arrival to the shelter were implemented.
- Daily hours were extended; the Center is now open Sundays for more public access.
- Dog walk and get-acquainted areas were built; a dog-walking program is being instituted using volunteer workers.

- A change in cat euthanasia procedures to a more humane method was instituted.
- The web page was expanded and updated.
- A computerized inventory and licensing system (entitled “Chameleon”) was installed.
- A grand opening/expo event to emphasize public education and exposure to the Center was held.
- There was increased use of volunteers and improved recruiting and training.
- The uniform for kennel staff was changed to decrease a “military” appearance.

FINDINGS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Health Care Agency** to all findings. The 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at the following findings:

1. The lack of permanent management, and the resultant insufficiency of direction and leadership, has had a detrimental affect on the Center. It is imperative that the best-qualified candidate for Director of Animal Care Services be selected, as this person will have a great impact on the overall operation of the Center.
2. It is similarly imperative to find the best-qualified candidate to fill the position of Chief Veterinarian.
3. The Veterinary management/staff have repeatedly neglected to follow their own policies and procedures regarding the timely treatment of ill or injured animals by not making daily rounds, inappropriate handling of controlled substances, and in the prevention of premature euthanization of potentially adoptable animals. Animals suspected of being ill with communicable diseases have not been immediately isolated and tested. Non-compliance with many policies and procedures has resulted in inadequate care and possible mistreatment of animals.
4. The Grand Jury has been advised by the Center that the most current and humane euthanization procedures are being used. The Grand Jury questions whether the techniques currently being used to euthanize feral cats are the most humane.
5. Issues such as inadequate staffing, poor employee attitudes, and low morale negatively impact the operation of the Center. A poor customer service image is the result of discourteous, uncaring attitudes being presented to the public.
6. The lack of cooperation that exists between the veterinary and kennel staffs is detrimental to both the employees and the animal population.
7. Advisory Board meetings are not well known or well publicized to the general public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. A response is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Health Care Agency** for each of the recommendations. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. The Health Care Agency conduct a nationwide search for a Director of Animal Care Services who possesses verifiable, successful experience in animal shelter management.
2. The Health Care Agency review the duties and responsibilities of the position of Chief Veterinarian and conduct a wide-ranging search for the best-qualified Doctor of Veterinary Medicine with extensive management skills.
3. The Director of the Health Care Agency should order a complete review of existing policies and procedures for the Veterinary management to determine if they are current, reasonable, and enforceable. The review should determine how, in fact, department personnel are actually implementing those policies and procedures.
4. The Health Care Agency should assure that the most humane methods of euthanasia that provide the utmost safety and comfort for the staff are being utilized. New techniques for rapid and humane euthanasia for domesticated and feral animals must be evaluated and implemented.
5. The Director of the Health Care Agency should order a complete internal review of the staffing levels, salary structure, and existing policy administration with Animal Care Services to ensure that the concerns noted in Finding #5 are being appropriately addressed.
6. Instruct the Director of Animal Care Services and the Chief Veterinarian to hold joint-sessions between their staffs to resolve their differences. Procedures must then be implemented to provide solutions to the lack of cooperation between the two units.
7. Animal Care Services should consider better methods of informing the public of the schedule of Advisory Board meetings utilizing their web-sites, posting information on bulletin boards at the Center, and supplying notices on cable television.

COMMENDATIONS

During the course of this study of Animal Care Services, the 1999–2000 Orange County Grand Jury was gratified by the level of cooperation repeatedly demonstrated by the administration and staff of the Health Care Agency. Lines of communication were developed that permitted the Grand Jury to be aware of changes that positively affected the staff and animals as they were occurring.

We wish to commend the Agency for the changes that have already been made within Animal Care Services, and we look forward to the improvements to be made in the future.