

# **Animal Care & Control**

## **Summary**

In recent years the Sonoma County **Animal Care and Control** (AC&C) has received negative publicity and allegations of wrongdoing. Although serious concerns were brought to the Grand Jury's attention, as the investigation progressed the Grand Jury found that many of those concerns no longer existed or had already been addressed. Management has changed, and along with the dedicated staff it continues to make improvements in the best interests of the animals and the public they serve. The Grand Jury believes that it is time for the public to recognize and appreciate the good work being done by AC&C.

## **Reason for Investigation**

The Grand Jury received complaints about AC&C in April, May and September of 2008. The Animal Shelter (Shelter) operated by AC&C is located at 1247 Century Court, Santa Rosa (near the airport). The complainants expressed concerns with the lack of literature regarding spay/neuter information available in Spanish and access to information for the Hispanic community in general. They also raised issues with management and staff, allegations of animal abuse and the use of unqualified rescue organizations.

## **Background**

AC&C is a division of the Agricultural Commissioner's Office and operates as a community service to the residents of Sonoma County. It is committed to serving the public in the care and well being of animals, both domestic and livestock, throughout the unincorporated areas of Sonoma County, the city of Santa Rosa and the town of Windsor.

The Shelter offers such diverse services as:

- Finding homes for adoptable animals
- Housing stray animals
- Offering assistance to owners and finders of lost animals
- Providing limited veterinary care
- Maintaining pet licensing
- Sponsoring various community education and outreach programs

The Shelter's field services include:

- Rescue and care of injured or distressed animals
- Rabies control
- Investigation of reports of animal abuse and neglect
- The enforcement of animal regulation laws and ordinances

In addition to its on-site and field personnel, the Shelter is assisted by the efforts of volunteers who work with the animals and participate in various education and fund-raising programs. Presently the volunteer numbers range between 70-100 per week, and in a recent month volunteers contributed 758 hours.

In years past the Shelter had difficulties among management, staff, and volunteers, which resulted in negative publicity and low morale. Subsequently, an independent audit of the Shelter was performed and recommendations were made and implemented. (Citygate Report, *3-Year Quick Start and Action Plan*, [http://www.sonoma-county.org/cao/pdf/animal\\_regulation\\_final\\_report1.pdf](http://www.sonoma-county.org/cao/pdf/animal_regulation_final_report1.pdf)). On two separate unannounced visits to the Shelter, the Grand Jury observed an enthusiastic staff and found conditions to be clean, organized and running efficiently.

### **Investigative Procedures**

The Grand Jury toured and inspected the Shelter.

Interviews and discussions were conducted with the following persons:

- Complainant
- Former Agricultural Commissioner
- Interim Division Director of Animal Care and Control
- Animal Care and Control Volunteer Coordinator
- Animal Care and Control Field Officer
- Supervisor / Animal Health Technician
- Clerical Staff member
- Animal Welfare Advisory Committee member

The following documents and resources were reviewed:

- Citygate Associates, LLC *Management Review of the County of Sonoma Animal Regulation Division*, Final Report June 5, 2006; with specific reference to the *3-Year Quick Start and Action Plan*
- Animal Care and Control Website
- Animal Care and Control recorded telephone system

- Sonoma County 2008-2009 budget
- County of Sonoma, California *Citizens Report*, Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2008
- 2003-04 Grand Jury Report and Response – *Animal Regulation Division June 4, 2004*

## Findings

F-1 Based on the independent audit of AC&C and the Shelter, many changes and improvements had already been implemented when the Grand Jury began this investigation.

F-2 The AC&C does not adequately provide access to information in Spanish through its telephone system, literature or website. As a result they are not effectively addressing the need to further educate and inform the Hispanic population regarding the services available.

F-3 The AC&C does not have a full time dispatcher working with its field officers, who respond to calls from throughout the County. Instead, staff members fill in as needed, and the Sheriff's department and/or other law enforcement agencies handle dispatch during off hours. This can leave the field officer in a vulnerable position, as the dispatcher must effectively transmit information, and also provide necessary backup to the officer, should the situation warrant it.

F-4 The AC&C uses inmate labor from the Sonoma County Adult Detention facility as part of their housekeeping staff. The quality of this labor has proven to be unreliable and disruptive. It requires additional supervision for training and security issues.

F-5 There are five other shelters within the County that provide additional service and work in conjunction with AC&C. As some of these shelters are private entities they have the prerogative to choose which animals to accept, unlike AC&C which must accept all animals.

F-6 The Mobile Animal Center (MAC) was purchased with donated funds prior to the independent audit. The MAC is not cost effective for its original intended use, which was to perform spay/neuter surgeries in the mobile unit throughout the community. Once the unit was put into operation, it was determined that it did not provide adequate space for the animals to recover. However, it is still being used in other ways and by other agencies.

F-7 The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee was created to advise the Board of Supervisors on animal welfare. The members, who are appointed by the

Board of Supervisors, no longer hold regular meetings or play a significant part in the function of AC&C.

### **Conclusions**

In order to adequately sustain and continue to improve services provided by AC&C, the necessary and appropriate levels of funding must be maintained. Special attention should be paid to adequate staffing levels, spay/neuter programs and the need for a full time dispatcher, as recommended by the *3-Year Quick Start and Action Plan*. It is important to keep in mind that as the population and demographics of Sonoma County changes to a more urban environment, the likely increase in numbers of cats and dogs, necessitates more education and focus on spay/neuter programs. With these changes, the need to provide information in Spanish also increases. The Agricultural Commissioner must address this need with appropriate funding to implement Spanish language resources.

The Grand Jury found that AC&C is functioning well and has a dedicated team of hard working, caring individuals serving the needs of the community. They found no evidence of animal abuse or use of unqualified rescue agencies. The AC&C staff must perform their jobs while facing ethical and emotional issues on a daily basis. They have made great strides in the quality of their service and this will become more evident as they continue implementing the Citygate recommendations.

The Grand Jury believes it is time for the public to put past negative perceptions to rest and recognize the good work that is being done by AC&C. Appropriately, the name change from “Animal Regulation Division” to its current “Animal Care and Control” supports the many caring services provided by the staff and volunteers, bringing the joy of their work to the community.

### **Commendations**

The Shelter staff is to be commended for its efforts in managing and supervising itself during stressful transitional times, with and without a Director. During that time, the launch of the *3-Year Quick Start Plan* is evidence of its commitment to the care and service of the animals and the people of Sonoma County.

## Recommendations

R-1 The Agricultural Commissioner should make sure that AC&C implements a working operational telephone system and website in Spanish. They should also generate informational literature in Spanish and make it available throughout the County.

R-2 AC&C should staff a full time Dispatcher at the Shelter or implement a part time arrangement of multiple personnel dedicated to this position of critical importance.

R-3 The Agricultural Commissioner should eliminate the use of inmate labor as recommended by the *3-Year Quick Start and Action Plan*.

R-4 AC&C should assess the cost effectiveness of operating and leasing the MAC. If this is not fiscally prudent, it should consider divesting itself of the MAC.

R-5 The Board of Supervisors should consider developing a new Citizens' group for animal welfare to render oversight more effectively, while also acting as advocates for AC&C. Alternatively, the current Animal Welfare Advisory Committee should meet regularly with AC&C and report back to the Board of Supervisors.

## Required responses

Agricultural Commissioner: F-2, F-3, F-4, F-6, R-1, R-2, R-3

AC&C Director: F-2, F-3, F-4, F-6, R-1, R-2, R-3, R-4

Board of Supervisors: F-7, R-5