

Response to 2011 - 12 Grand Jury Report Form
(Insert Fiscal Year)

Report Title: Ventura County Animal Services Department

Report Date: 6/12/12 Responding Agency/Dept. Ventura County Animal Services


Response by: Donna Gillesby Title: Interim Animal Services Director
Barry Fisher Title: Public Health Director

FINDINGS

- I (we) agree with the findings numbered: FI-03, FI-04, FI-05, FI-07, FI-10, FI-12, FI-13, FI-14, FI-15, FI-16, FI-20, FI-26, FI-27, FI-29, FI-30, FI-33, FI-34 and FI-36.
- I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: FI-06, FI-08, FI-09, FI-11, FI-17, FI-18, FI-19, FI-21, FI-23, FI-24, FI-25, FI-31, FI-32, FI-35 and FI-38.
(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefore.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendations numbered R-05, R-06, R-07, R-09, R-10, R-11, R-12, R-15 and R-22 have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered R-02, R-04 and R-13 have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered R-03, R-14, R-16, R-17, and R-18 require further analysis.
(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.)
- Recommendations numbered R-08 will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

Date: 8/31/12 Signed: 
Robert Gonzalez, MD
Director, Ventura County Health Care Agency

Number of pages attached: 10

**Responses to 2011-2012 Grand Jury Final Report
Ventura County Animal Services Department
From Ventura County Animal Services**

Note: Although not required, responses clarifying the following facts (FA-13, FA-19 and FA-20) cited in the subject report are provided for information purposes.

FACTS

FA-13 In year 2010 the Department's euthanasia rate for dogs entering the shelter was 30%. The Department's euthanasia rate for felines entering the shelter was 65%. The Department's overall euthanasia rate for dogs and cats was 40%. The estimated (human) population of Ventura County in 2011 was 830,215 (12th by size in California).

Agree. In 2010, VCAS began using the terms to describe euthanasia as presented by the Asilomar Accords. These definitions of euthanasia allow for uniform and accurate collection, analysis and reporting of animal sheltering statistics. In 2010, the euthanasia rate for healthy treatable dogs was 20.5%. The same euthanasia rate for cats was 37.7%. These numbers include animals euthanized with rehabilitable minor conditions, illnesses and injuries, those that have behavior that would need continued management, as well as those that were euthanized for time and/or space.

FA-19 Bordetella inoculation of dogs in shelters is recommended by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV).

Agree.

FA-20 Bordetella inoculation of dogs entering the Shelter is not a matter of permanent policy of the Department

Agree. However, Shelter staff has begun inoculating all dogs with the Bordetella vaccine at intake. This is part of a Public Health study that will evaluate Bordetella's effectiveness at the Shelter. Data is being collected over several months and will be analyzed by Public Health staff. The results of this study will help determine future shelter policy regarding the use the vaccine.

FINDINGS

FI-03 The Department operates a service whose principal mandated mission is the control of rabies and the health and safety of the public.

Agree.

FI-04 The Department's mandated mission and collateral services put the Department in close and personal contact with the public.

Agree.

FI-05 The humane treatment of animals and the euthanizing of animals is a focus point of many County citizens and is the subject of extensive newspaper coverage.

Agree.

FI-06 The Department's mandated mission and collateral services bring the Department into conflict with elements of "animal-rescue" public.

Partially disagree. The large majority of animal rescue groups are not in conflict with Ventura County Animal Services (VCAS). VCAS recognizes the importance of maintaining good relations with all of the animal rescue groups in the community. As of August 2012, VCAS has worked with 63 animal rescue groups this year resulting in 716 animals adopted. VCAS greatly respects and is grateful for the work they do.

Animal rescue groups have varying expectations of VCAS abilities to serve their needs. For the most part, these varying expectations are manageable and supportable by VCAS. However, a small minority of the animal-rescue public have undertaken a campaign against VCAS. The campaign's negativity did affect staff morale which gives context to the "siege mentality" perception mentioned in this report (Ref. FI-38, R-22). As noted in our response to R-22, under the leadership of Public Health, several actions have already taken place to address this issue. Additional resources are being implemented including Public Health's Public Information Officer and further training from EAP and the American Humane Association to strengthen and support staff's efforts.

FI-07 The Department outsources all shelter spaying and neutering services required or requested.

Agree. Spay and neuter services are performed on-site by a veterinarian under contract (non-County employee). This has traditionally been done to allow for flexibility within the department however management is looking at hiring a second veterinarian at this time.

FI-08 The Department outsources emergency services for animal injuries and nighttime animal incidents.

Disagree partially. VCAS does not outsource injuries requiring medical treatment during normal business hours. VCAS does contract with a private pet emergency clinic (PEC) for life threatening emergencies that occur outside of business hours (7:30 p.m. to 6 a.m.). PEC will stabilize and hold the animal until the next morning for VCAS staff to pick up. The animal's medical needs are then treated on site by County staff. If an injury occurs that is not urgent or life threatening, it is impounded into the Shelter's hospital and seen by veterinary staff in the morning.

FI-09 The Department is understaffed for medical and technical personnel considering its volume of required animal intake and services.

Disagree partially. Animal intake has increased by 13% over the past three years. This increase has impacted Shelter staff including the medical and technical personnel. In addition to increased intake, another pressure is to contain costs for the partner cities in the Shelter program.

FI-10 One veterinarian cannot, overtime, physically perform all day and night veterinarian medical services of the Shelter.

Agree. The department is evaluating the possibility of bringing some services in-house which will help fund additional staff.

FI-11 The Department's "unique" County Shelter Home Inspection Procedure requires the absence of trained personnel from other Shelter duties.

Disagree. The home inspections are performed by VCAS field personnel, not shelter staff. The home inspections are strategically scheduled for Field Animal Control Officers (ACOs) during their shifts and in the most efficient manner possible.

FI-12 Internet posting of information of animal adoption candidates – their photo, medical information, breed size, configuration, and temperament – is critical to the timeline of an animal's adoption and survival.

Agree. Since the reorganization with Public Health, utilization of its two webmasters has facilitated the re-construction of the VCAS website (<http://www.vchca.org/animal-services>).

FI-13 The Department has difficulty in the timely and thorough servicing of its animal adoption Internet service.

Agree. Addressed in FI-12

FI-14 The Department lacks professionally-trained personnel to maintain its internet site.

Agree. Addressed in FI-12

FI-15 Department personnel involved in the euthanasia process evidence low morale and "empathy fatigue"

Agree.

FI-16 Stress reduction training is available to County organizations and individual employees through EAP. The department will work with EAP to provide on-going

access to these services.

Agree.

FI-17 The use of the Bordetella vaccine for dogs has become standardized in animal care facilities in the United States.

Disagree partially. The Grand Jury's survey that supports this statement has not been made available for review. Upon independent investigation using the CACDA (California Animal Control Director's Association) list, several shelters confirmed they were administering Bordetella upon intake. Whether or not the administering of the vaccine is standardized requires further investigation.

FI-18 The Bordetella inoculation of intake dogs is not a matter of permanent policy of the Department.

Disagree partially. As previously mentioned (Ref. FA-20), a protocol regarding the administering of the Bordetella vaccine is being evaluated by Public Health staff. No specific vaccination regime is part of permanent policy since the efficacy of each vaccine is reviewed periodically by veterinary staff. All dogs that can be safely handled are vaccinated with Bordetella as part of the Public Health study that is underway.

FI-19 The Department has not budgeted for the purchase of the Bordetella vaccine, though it has accepted a temporary grant to inoculate certain dogs.

Disagree. While the vaccine was not budgeted for in the FY11/12 budget, it was included in the FY12/13 budget. In late FY11/12 a temporary grant was accepted to fund the procurement of the vaccine.

FI-20 A planned and budgeted "one-stop process" animal intake facility is scheduled.

Agree. The facility's projected completion date is September 2012 (Ref. R-4).

FI-21 The Department utilizes and trains volunteers to assist in the Shelter's activities. Department volunteer training is lengthy, with "no hands-on" - regardless of animal handling experience – and volunteers rarely are used for "inside-trust" work.

Disagree. Volunteers undergo a nine-class cycle to familiarize them with shelter policies. Over the nine class schedule, the volunteers are progressively provided hands-on training. Hands-on training typically occurs after the fourth class. At that time, volunteers wishing to continue advancing their abilities, and responsibilities, are offered the balance of the classes.

Trained volunteers work alongside Staff cleaning cages, taking pictures and getting weights in both shelters. Volunteers also exercise and groom the animals. At this year's Adopt-A-Thon, volunteers began showing animals to the public and taking pets out to

vehicles to decrease the wait time for the public. Volunteers also do all the Offsite Adoption Events without benefit of uniformed Staff.

FI-23 Restrictive dog group housing procedures have resulted in less than optimal use of kennel space and unnecessary animal stress.

Disagree. Restricted kennel sharing is a necessary action. Historically, restricting dog grouping has been proven effective in managing contagious disease outbreaks in the main population.

FI-24 The Department relies on experience-training for Shelter personnel, who often identify "pit bull mix" characteristics without identifying what kind of "mix" is suggested, when classifying Shelter and Internet breed descriptions.

Disagree partially. It is difficult, at times, to distinguish what the secondary breed component may be to the dog that is categorized as a pitbull, which in and of itself is a slang term for a dog with similar characteristics of the American Staffshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier or American Bull Terrier. American Kennel Club (AKC) and United Kennel Club (UKC) do not recognize the breed "pitbull" but ordinary citizens do. If there is a prominent secondary breed, it will be included.

FI-25 The Medical Section of the Department operates autonomously with minimal supervision from the administration with respect to scheduling, work hour accountability, and resource usage, including vehicle usage and storage.

Disagree. The veterinarian has consistently maintained proper communication with the Shelter Director. The veterinarian schedule and medical support coverage is approved by Deputy Director.

FI-26 Scheduling of medical functions affects the continuity and efficiency of Shelter adoption processes.

Agree. With only one County veterinarian the Shelter does not have 24/7 veterinary coverage. Management is evaluating the hiring of a second veterinarian.

FI-27 At times, entry of medical information and other action data into Shelter software is not entered contemporaneously with the service performed and is often entered by other than the actors.

Agree. Animal information is often entered into Shelter software after the service has been performed. Shelter protocol states the entry of animal information to be entered by the tending Animal Control Officer. Occasional deviations of this protocol may occur due to operational demands.

FI-29 The Department's proposed mandatory "Spaying and Neutering of Pit Bulls" legislation affects all owners of dogs in legislated city and County areas who own dogs

with “pit bull” physical features.

Agree.

FI-30 Under the proposed ordinances, classification of mixed breeds labeled as “pit bulls” is to be subjectively and finally judged by the Department.

Agree.

FI-31 Persons owning dogs judged to be “pit bull mixes” are subject to fines for not having had spay or neuter surgery performed on their dogs.

Disagree. This is currently not the case. If the proposed Spay/Neuter ordinance was implemented a fine would be assessed.

FI-32 Adoption of the proposed legislation will increase the work load of Shelter officers.

Disagree. Admittedly, the beginning phase of the proposed legislation (enforcement) will impact the workload at the Shelter. However, more importantly over time the legislation will gradually reduce the number of pitbulls coming into the Shelter. This permanent, gradual reduction in pitbull mixes will decrease workload and decrease other findings in this report such as euthanasia rates, empathy fatigue and work stress on medical personnel (less medical procedures).

FI-33 The proposed legislation provides for an appeal process whereby, on appeal, the Department’s appellate decision of its own field classification decision is final.

Agree.

FI-34 Under the legislation, the prior social history of the animal under consideration is irrelevant.

Agree.

FI-35 Unnecessary, time-consuming adoption processing delays, repeated and prolonged visits, and an indifferent “Shelter attitude” are often encountered by the public at the Shelter service counter.

Disagree. Repeated visits to the shelter are necessary to adopt and pick up animals that remain on the premises due to medical needs (e.g., spayed/neuter). Every effort is made by shelter personnel to quickly process adoptions and reclaims to expedite the time that is spent in line by the public at the counter. An indifferent “Shelter attitude” is not the norm at the shelter. This perception may occur if Shelter staff is informing the unhappy customer as to why their animal is at the shelter. The ACO may seem indifferent when explaining the laws and fees to the customer. Counter staff do

encounter many people in emotional situations at the front counter and do their best to be professional and helpful. However, we agree that continuous improvement is always warranted and we will continue to pursue such improvement in this area.

FI-36 The Shelter's telephone answering service takes an inordinate amount of time to provide contact options and does not allow for personal contact.

Agree. Staff is addressing this issue by installing a new phone system.

FI-38 Department management has seriously detracted from its effectiveness and mission by poor communication evidencing a "siege mentality".

Disagree. Since the time of this report, VCAS has reorganized under Public Health. This change will help VCAS with the necessary resources to achieve mission success. In our opinion there is not a "siege mentality" at the Shelter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R-02 That the Department bring outsourced services in-house and hire a second County veterinarian.

To be implemented. Management has taken action to hire a second veterinarian and several veterinary technicians at the Shelter. These additional position requests will be brought before the Board of Supervisors for approval by October 2012. Staff recognizes several benefits to this action; one benefit is that it will enable the shelter to provide veterinary coverage at the Shelter seven days a week.

R-03 That the Department institute inoculation of all incoming dogs with the Bordatella vaccine as a permanent policy.

Further analysis is needed. Staff has implemented inoculations at this time however further analysis of the vaccine's effectiveness on upper respiratory infections (URI) is needed. The necessity for Bordatella vaccines is not universally agreed upon in the medical community. Public Health staff is undertaking a study to evaluate the vaccine's efficacy. The results of the study and determination of Shelter policy regarding the vaccine will be finalized in March 2013.

R-04 That the Department expedite the completion of the planned and budgeted "one-stop" intake facility.

Will be implemented. Project is scheduled for completion in September 2012. We expect the intake facility to expedite the processing of an animal into the shelter system. This will increase the animal's chances of adoption by publicizing its pertinent information to the VCAS website. Additionally, it will make more time available for Animal Control Officers (ACOs) by centralizing the location for animal processing at the shelter allowing them

more time to perform other duties.

R-05 That the Department employ an expert Internet website maintenance employee, or utilize an expert site maintenance volunteer, to improve and maintain its website.

Implemented. Public Health has two webmasters that have updated the VCAS website. The search capabilities have been greatly improved to help owners of lost animals as well as the public looking to adopt an animal (<http://www.vchca.org/animal-services>). Additionally, a Services and Resources Directory page has been added which increases the site's navigation capabilities (<http://www.vchca.org/animal-services/services-and-resources>).

R-06 That the Department administration exercise more direct control and require more accountability of the medical section with respect to hours of work, overtime, vehicle usage, on-call, and other non-medical policies and practices.

Implemented. The reorganization under Public Health has enhanced accountability of the medical department. Medical staff at VCAS is working closely with the Interim Director of Animal Services as well as the Director of Public Health. The Interim Director coordinates medical staff's needs and determines the schedule for the medical staff.

R-07 That the Department institute biannual mandatory Employee Assistance Program counter stress technique training for all personnel involved with the euthanizing process, including administrative "list makers".

Will partially be implemented. Staff is implementing annual training to be performed by the American Humane Association (AHA). Additional training is being evaluated through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) recently provided a one-day compassion fatigue workshop at the shelter.

R-08 That the Department eliminate its "unique" Shelter home inspections policy and better utilize trained personnel for core Shelter duties.

Will not be implemented. Staff recognizes the challenges with the home inspection program however the program's benefits outweigh the negatives. Home inspections provide a unique opportunity to ensure "power breed" dogs are placed in a safe environment upon adoption. VCAS feels a moral obligation to ensure a safe environment to the owner and to the animal.

R-09 That the Department reach out to volunteer breed experts and breed classifiers to better train Shelter personnel to more accurately judge breed mixes and act, at times, for the Shelter in classifying dogs on intake and for Internet descriptions.

Implemented. Within the past year two breed classes were offered to staff and volunteers, one by an in-house expert and the other by an AKC judge. Sometimes the

dog's "mix" is so diluted (composed of several identifiable breeds) that it's difficult to determine. Staff will continue to look into improving the breed classification function in VCAS. More training on this matter has been implemented and several classes have been completed. Due to the dynamic and complex nature of this task, this is considered to be on-going. Finally, VCAS recognizes the importance not only of properly classifying breeds but also ensuring the transfer of this knowledge to all Shelter staff.

R-10 That the Department include with every "pit bull mix" classification, the suspected "mix" breed in the Shelter and Internet description.

Implemented. A secondary breed will be included in the animal description when it can be determined. It is difficult, at times, to distinguish what the secondary breed component may be to the dog that is categorized as a pitbull, which in and of itself is a slang term for a dog with similar characteristics of the American Staffshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier or American Bull Terrier. The American Kennel Club (AKC) and the UKC do not recognize the breed "pitbull" but ordinary citizens do. If a prominent secondary breed can be identified, it will be included in the animal description.

R-11 That the Department work to improve the selection of compatible breeds in order to increase common kenneling.

Implemented. Common kenneling is utilized at the Shelter on a discretionary basis. Breed compatibility is one of the factors included in the determination of common kenneling.

R-12 That the Department take better care to avoid co-locating breeds in kennels likely to bring stress upon one another.

Implemented. The east wing of the Shelter has been made available for the co-kenneling of small dogs. Several factors are included in the determination; one is the likelihood of stress upon the animal due to co-location.

R-13 That the Department redesign its telephone answering service to reduce the categories of options presented.

Will be implemented. VCAS is working with ITSD (Information Technology Services Department) to redesign and update the Shelter's phone tree and answering service. The projected completion date is September 2012.

R-14 That the Department afford clients in a same-day single adoption transaction a "head of the line" pass when a second or third line wait is required as part of the transaction.

Requires further analysis. Staff is researching optimal ways of expediting customer needs at the counter, namely in same-day adoptions. The "head of the line" option is one of several options to be analyzed. Management will utilize Lean Six Sigma

techniques to analyze and determine an optimal customer service plan for the front counter by the December 2013.

R-15 That the Department revise the training program for volunteers to progressively introduce hands-on animal contact during the training.

Implemented. Volunteers are being given the opportunity to provide more “hands on” animal contact during training. However, not all volunteers are interested in this degree of animal contact.

R-16 That the Department train and utilize competent volunteers to undertake substantive internal administrative duties as well as animal contact duties.

Requires further analysis. Opportunities will be analyzed to optimize competent and willing volunteers to take on administrative duties at the Shelter. However, some restrictions apply in terms of cash handling and other actions that may require additional VCAS management oversight. This analysis will be completed by December 2012.

R-17 That the Department revise its proposed mandatory “pit bull” spay and neuter ordinance program to cover only dogs brought, or caught and brought, to the Shelter.

Requires further analysis. Staff is analyzing this notion as well as other options regarding a spay/neuter ordinance in Ventura County. The issue is a complex one that requires coordination with our partner cities as well. Further analysis and determination of future actions are to be completed by March 2013.

R-18 That the Department revise its proposed mandatory “pit bull” spay and neuter ordinance program appeal process to include an “outside” review by a three-person hearing panel of volunteer breed experts not in the employ of the County – including a least one volunteer veterinarian – in lieu of Department review of its earlier decision.

Requires further analysis. Management is determining whether this recommendation can be included with the protocol once a spay/neuter ordinance is passed by the elected bodies throughout the County. Further analysis to be completed by March 2013.

R-22 That management leadership review their communication and leadership skills by utilizing customer-designed EAP training to enhance those skills, avoid a “siege mentality”, and consequently, to increase the effectiveness of the Department and its public and intra-governmental image.

Implemented. Under the leadership of Public Health, several actions have already taken place to address these concerns. Additional resources are being implemented including Public Health’s Public Information Officer and further training from EAP and the American Humane Association.