

2024 – 2025



Civil Grand Jury

Final Report

**Ventura County
Animal Services Commission**

June 17, 2025

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Ventura County Animal Services Commission

SUMMARY

The Ventura County Animal Services Commission is an advisory board empowered to facilitate communication and collaboration between the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and the eight incorporated cities that contract with Ventura County Animal Services to provide animal welfare, control, shelter facilities, and field services.

The 2024-2025 Ventura County Civil Grand Jury identified concerns regarding the Ventura County Animal Services Commission's adherence to its bylaws, inconsistent meeting schedules, and ineffective communication. These and other issues have weakened the Ventura County Animal Commission's core mission: to advise, guide, support, and collaborate with Ventura County Animal Services.

The 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, and Ventura County Animal Services reinvigorate the scope, focus, function and effectiveness of the Ventura County Animal Services Commission.

METHODOLOGY

The 2024-2025 Ventura County Civil Grand Jury conducted interviews with Ventura County Animal Services Commission members, county and city officials, and Ventura County Animal Services management and staff; reviewed commission meeting records, analyzed budget reports, evaluated year-by-year data, made several site visits, studied academic research, surveyed social media, explored news reports, and examined contractual agreements between Ventura County Animal Services and eight contracting cities.

BACKGROUND

The 2024-2025 Ventura County Civil Grand Jury identified the Ventura County Animal Services Commission (Commission) as the strategic cornerstone for animal welfare, animal control, animal shelter, and animal field services provided by Ventura County Animal Services (VCAS) to the eight incorporated cities of Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai, Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Simi Valley, and Ventura (Contract Cities), and all unincorporated areas of Ventura County.

The following provides historical context for the Commission:

- The Animal Regulation Committee was created in 1978 by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors (VCBOS) as an ad hoc committee "...for the purpose of providing input to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors with respect to bringing about a self-supporting budget for Animal Regulation and to find ways to fund a new central facility as well as possible satellite animal regulation facilities." (Att-01)
- By 1980, the Animal Regulation ad hoc committee evolved into what would become the Commission, creating by-laws defining the Commission's purpose: "To serve as a policy level Commission to the cities of Ventura County, and the Ventura County Board of Supervisors in matters pertaining to Ventura County's Animal Regulation Program in

planning for Animal Regulation programs, resources or legislation to meet the needs of the County and cities; in formulating plans for a cooperative effort of Animal Regulation resources within the County and among State, Federal and other agencies.” (Att-02)

- The targeted goal of the Commission was to establish a forum to facilitate a dynamic working partnership between the county and Contract Cities’ municipal government entities responsible for funding, operation, policy, programs, and oversight of animal welfare in Ventura County.
- Between 1979 and 2012, the Commission fulfilled the core advisory mission of collaboration and communication, coordinating service agreements with the Contract Cities for animal services, supporting funding for shelter facilities, regulation enforcement, and other animal control requirements. (Ref-01)
- The Commission currently has nine voting members, one elected representative from each of the eight Contract Cities, and one elected member from the VCBOS. (Ref-02)
- The cities of Thousand Oaks and Santa Paula currently do not contract with VCAS for animal services. (Ref-01, Ref-03)

Between 1978 and 2012, the Commission fulfilled its mandated duties effectively and in compliance with their established by-laws. However, starting in 2012, the subsequent 12 years were a time of systemic transformation in industry-wide best practices (Best Practices), leading to a fundamental life-affirming change in animal welfare, control, and shelter operations. (Ref-01, Ref-04, Ref-05, Att-02)

Prior to 2012, like most government funded municipal shelters at the time, VCAS operated the Camarillo facility with no commitment to live-release. Animals brought to VCAS, unless reunited, adopted, or rescued, would be euthanized in a very short time for medical issues, behavioral concerns, or primarily to maintain limits on the animal population at the shelter. (Ref-01)

In 2012, the Commission prompted and supported by public input, advocated to VCBOS that VCAS should commit to becoming an open admission 90% live-release no-kill shelter (Open Admission). The VCBOS responded to growing public advocacy and supported VCAS in making the transition to become certified as an Open Admission shelter. (Ref-01, Ref-04, Att-03)

VCAS initiated the transition to an Open Admission model, and in 2014 achieved the industry’s best practices threshold of a 90% live-release rate. The implementation of this life-saving Open Admission policy led directly to increased financial pressures on both the county and Contract Cities. This change also resulted in several unforeseen consequences that had a negative impact on shelter capacity and operations at VCAS. (Ref-01, Ref-05, Att-04)

The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury found between 2015 and 2024; the Commission’s advisory role faded. Commission by-laws were not followed. Scheduled Commission meetings were cancelled. Contract Cities focused primarily on reducing their own contract costs. Communication and collaboration between the Commission and VCAS declined. By 2024, the Commission’s ability to carry out its mission had been undermined and weakened. (Ref-01, Ref-06).

DISCUSSION

By 1980, the VCBOS established the advisory Commission to collaborate directly with VCAS. The Commission was charged with working side by side, hand in hand with the VCAS Director. (Ref-01, Att-02)

The VCAS office and main shelter complex are in Camarillo. The buildings and facilities date back to 1985, show their age, and are in dire need of updating to accommodate animal shelter 2025 Best Practices. (Ref-01, Att-05)

In 1984, the Commission facilitated service contracts between the Contract Cities and VCAS. These Animal Service Agreements (ASA) itemized the scale, scope and cost of animal welfare, animal control, animal shelter services, and field services provided by VCAS to each of the incorporated Contract Cities. (Ref-01, Ref-03)

VCBOS sets the budget for VCAS to provide welfare, control, shelter, and field services to the unincorporated areas of Ventura County. The total amount of the ASA contracts is included each year in the VCAS annual budget as a revenue line item. Any budget shortfall between the ASA service contract amounts and actual costs of services provided is an overage covered solely in the county budget approved by VCBOS. (Ref-01, Ref-07, Ref-08)

By 2014, VCAS achieved the Open Admission threshold, and the financial impact was immediate. The number of animals being housed and their length of stay at the shelter increased under the new Open Admission policy. The costs for services provided to Contract Cities and budget shortfalls increased. Simultaneously, the 40+ year advisory role and collaborative relationship between VCAS and the Commission began to fray and erode as financial pressures increased. (Ref-01, Att-4)

In 2019, VCAS worked directly with the Contract Cities, revising the ASAs to include more accurate budget projections giving each of the Contract Cities an accounting mechanism and formulas to afford some cost control over their own contractual requirements and service levels. (Ref-01, Att-05, Att-06, Att-07)

The once cooperative partnership between the Contract Cities and VCAS degraded into a more client-vendor, contractually defined relationship. Costs continued to increase. The Contract Cities became more and more focused on and concerned about their individual, year-by-year, ever-growing fiscal demands, rather than on Best Practice requirements. (Ref-01, Ref-08)

As of the date of this report, all eight Contract Cities are under contract through June 30, 2025, are negotiating with VCAS, and are expected to extend their contracts for an additional year, beginning July 1, 2025, and running through June 30, 2026. The current contracts do not effectively address the ever-rising costs of shelter and field services provided by VCAS, nor the negative ramifications of reduced service levels and growing VCAS budget shortfalls resulting from budget-capped ASA revenue. (Ref-01, Ref-08, Att-05, Att-06, Att-08)

The VCAS Director oversees a staff tasked with providing multi-tiered levels of care and ensuring the safety of a fluctuating population of animals, while meeting the clerical and business responsibilities of a governmental agency. (Ref-01, Ref-08)

It is important to note this agency is the primary daily interface with the residents of Ventura County for animal welfare, animal control, and animal services. Based on the demographics of Ventura County, it is surprising the VCAS website is English-only, as are most, if not all, VCAS documents, enforcement materials, and other written communication with the public. (Ref-01, Ref-08)

An energetic and dedicated crew of over 400 volunteers assists the VCAS staff. The volunteers working at the shelter support and supplement the staff, allowing animal control officers to fulfil ASA contractual obligations, attend to basic needs of the unincorporated areas, and respond to daily emergencies involving the safety of both humans and animals in Ventura County. (Ref-01, Ref-03)

The VCAS Camarillo shelter opened in 1985 and was designed and built as a municipal shelter intended for a short length-of-stay, euthanasia-first model. In 2012, VCAS transitioned to an Open Admission shelter model, and immediately animal intake and length-of-stay increased. Additionally, the buildings were aging, and the facility infrastructure did not have adequate sanitation protections or safeguards to ensure the health and well-being of the animals housed at the shelter. (Ref-01, Att-04)

When VCAS adopted the Open Admission model, the number of animals taken from the VCAS shelter by local rescue groups and foster options reduced dramatically, creating an unexpected consequence. Between 2012 and 2024, the number of animals taken out of the shelter each year by these local groups and individuals dropped from approximately 2,000 per year to only about 200 animals a year. That resulted in an increase of almost 1,800 more animals in the shelter each year. (Ref-01, Ref-06, Att-09)

The ripple effects from over-capacity are significant. The more animals in the shelter, the more it costs; more animals put more strain on out-dated facilities; more animals require more food and supplies; more animals require more veterinary care and medicine; more animals require more staff and volunteers; and of course, more animals crowded together inflict more stress on more animals. (Ref-01, Ref-09, Ref-10, Ref-11)

One industry-accepted method to identify the impact of animal shelter capacity is Capacity for Care (C4C). C4C gauges a shelter's ability to "meet the needs of every animal admitted to the shelter." The C4C metrics include data about staffing, intakes, outcomes, length of stays, and kennel capacity levels, creating a snapshot to identify and evaluate the major stress points at shelters. (Ref-01, Ref-12, Ref-13, Ref-14)

According to the University of California Davis's Koret Shelter Medicine Program, the most reliable ways to improve C4C rates is "increase live outcomes, decrease intake and reduce length of stay." The primary method employed by traditional municipal shelters to reduce animal population is euthanasia. Open Admission shelters, like VCAS, embrace a variety of non-lethal options such as adoptions, rescue groups, foster placements, and spay/neuter programs. (Ref-01, Ref-15)

Spay/neuter ordinances have been passed in many communities, but without rigorous enforcement, spay/neuter ordinances cannot improve C4C ratios nor address the underlying issues. Data and studies show that no-cost or low-cost spay/neuter programs are more effective, use engagement rather than enforcement, and deliver and sustain long-term results. (Ref-01, Ref-16, Ref-17, Ref-18)

As elected city and county leaders, Commission members are responsible for representing their constituencies and supporting VCAS with targeted education and engagement campaigns. The Commission's influence and involvement can function as a dynamic catalyst, encouraging local support within each community, as VCAS establishes no cost or low cost spay/neuter programs and develops other proactive initiatives throughout the county. (Ref-01, Ref-19)

The Commission was created over 40 years ago empowered to provide stewardship for animal welfare, control, and shelter services in Ventura County. The Commission, comprised of elected representatives, offers a public forum for discussion and facilitates debate while also performing a vital advisory function regarding budget, policies, programs, facilities, and overall operations of VCAS. (Ref-01, Ref-05)

As part of this stewardship, the Commission can embrace a leadership role in another important responsibility by focusing on addressing the mental health and wellness of the staff and volunteers who do the day-to-day work at VCAS. Humans who care for animals are usually motivated by a pure love and deep empathy for all living creatures. This often leads to compassion fatigue. (Ref-01, Ref-20, Ref-21, Ref-22)

Compassion fatigue has long been identified within the animal welfare community as a major mental health and wellness issue that negatively impacts staff and volunteers exposed to the never-ending cycle of trauma and emotional stress at shelters. The 2011-2012 Civil Grand Jury report identified compassion fatigue as a systemic problem at the Ventura County animal shelter. Through interviews with management and staff, the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury reconfirmed compassion fatigue remains an issue at VCAS. (Ref-01, Ref-20, Ref-21, Ref-22, Ref-23)

The Commission is well-positioned to encourage significant and positive changes by taking proactive measures to bolster existing mental health programs, and support new ones, and to undertake wellness initiatives focused on combating the damaging impact of compassion fatigue on the humans and animals at VCAS. (Ref-01, Ref-21, Ref-22, Ref-23)

As a result of the November 2024 county-wide elections, the 2025 Commission has a mix of new and returning members. A new VCAS Director took the helm in late 2024 and has implemented some initiatives and engagement programs with successful results. A much-needed updated shelter facility design, budget, and schedule are in the final phases prior to construction. (Ref-01, Ref-05, Att-10)

This lays the foundation for the Commission to take a proactive leadership role, rebuild a symbiotic relationship with the VCAS Director and staff, and strengthen engagement, education, and outreach programs in support of the VCAS mission to provide 2025 Best Practices animal welfare, animal control, animal shelter and animal field services to Ventura County. (Ref-01)

FINDINGS

F-01. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission's core mission to advise, guide, support, and collaborate with Ventura County Animal Services has been undermined due to issues such as non-adherence to its bylaws, inconsistent meeting schedules, and ineffective communication.

F-02. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that between 2015 and 2024, the Ventura County Animal Services Commission's advisory role, communication purpose, and collaboration process diminished replaced by a narrow focus on limiting or reducing contract costs.

F-03. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the transition to an Open Admission shelter in 2014 increased financial pressure on both the county and Contract Cities, forcing Ventura County Animal Services to place budget considerations ahead of Best Practices for animal control, shelter care and field services.

F-04. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the cooperative partnership between the eight Contract Cities and Ventura County Animal Services evolved from a collaborative partnership into a client-vendor relationship, leading to splintered purposes, conflicting priorities, and a decline in unified commitment.

F-05. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the current Animal Services Agreements do not adequately address rising costs of shelter and field services, requiring Ventura County Animal Services to use funding, staffing, supply, and facility workarounds to compensate for budget shortfalls.

F-06. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the Ventura County Animal Services Camarillo shelter, which opened in 1985, is aging, outdated, and consistently over-crowded with animals, as Ventura County Animal Services maintains its mission to be an Open Admission, 90% live-release model.

F-07. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that there has been a significant decrease in the number of animals being taken out of the shelter by local rescue groups and foster options, adding another stress factor to the consistent over-capacity of the Camarillo shelter population.

F-08. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that academic research deems spay/neuter ordinances insufficient without effective enforcement. In contrast, no-cost or low-cost spay/neuter programs have proven far more effective and successful as a long-term solution.

F-09. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that compassion fatigue negatively impacts human animal welfare workers, and the consequences of compassion fatigue on the mental health and wellness of Ventura County Animal Services staff and volunteers are not being adequately identified nor sufficiently addressed.

F-10. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that Thousand Oaks and Santa Paula are the only incorporated cities in Ventura County that do not contract with Ventura County Animal Services, leading to confusion and frustration for the public trying to determine which agency is responsible for their animal services.

F-11. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the English-only Ventura County Animal Services website, written materials, and other communication with the public do not foster, and can be a deterrent to, engagement with the non-English-speaking population of Ventura County.

F-12. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that an antiquated sanitation system, lack of necessary air-filtration systems, and the inability to quarantine contribute to viral medical issues. These conditions interfere with the safety and welfare of the population at the outdated shelter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R-01. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission review, reevaluate, and revise Commission by-laws to facilitate better communication and nurture stronger collaboration between the Commission, Ventura County Board of Supervisors, and Ventura County Animal Services. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-01, F-02, F-04)

R-02. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission enhance accountability by establishing a transparent process and structured procedure to fulfill its core advisory role with the Ventura County Board of Supervisors. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04)

R-03. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission support Ventura County Animals Services in developing proactive strategies and implementing community-targeted spay/neuter, licensing, and micro-chipping programs. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-06, F-07, F-08)

R-04. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission support Ventura County Animal Services' re-engagement with local rescue and foster groups and other effective and proven methods that lead to long-term decreases in shelter population. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-06, F-07, F-08)

R-05. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, Ventura County Animal Services Commission, and Ventura County Animal Services review, re-evaluate, and revise the Contract City Animal Services Agreements to better conform to 2025 Best Practices for animal welfare, control, shelter, and field services. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-03, F-04, F-05)

R-06. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and Ventura County Animal Services implement mental health programs specifically targeted to address the effects of compassion fatigue on the staff and volunteers working at Ventura County Animal Services. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-09)

R-07. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and Ventura County Animal Services open a dialogue with the cities of Santa Paula and Thousand Oaks regarding contracting with Ventura County Animal Services for potential cost saving and uniformity of service for residents of Ventura County. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-10)

R-08. The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Animal Services Commission assist Ventura County Animal Services in securing grants for special care, education, and training programs not covered in the Ventura County Animal Services annual budget. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2025. (F-03, F-05)

RESPONSES

Responses invited from:

The following appointed officials within 60 days:

Director of Ventura County Animal Services (F-01, F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, F-07, F-08, F-09, F-10, F-11, F-12, R-01, R-03, R-04, R-05, R-06, R-07, R-08)

Ventura County Animal Services Commission (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, F-09, F-11, R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04, R-05)

Responses required from:

The following governing bodies within 90 days:

Ventura County Board of Supervisors (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-05, F-06, F-08, F-09, F-10, F-11, F-12, R-01, R-02, R-05, R-06, R-07)

COMMENDATIONS

The Civil Grand Jury commends the Ventura County residents who volunteer to work with Ventura County Animal Services at the Camarillo and Simi Valley shelters, work together with Ventura County Animal Services staff in education and outreach programs, and open their homes and hearts as foster havens for all kinds of animals. These volunteers are involved in daily animal care and companionship, help with medical and well-being support, and assist marketing and fundraising efforts. Ventura County Animal Services would not be able to function successfully without the hundreds of volunteers who give their time, effort, compassion, and love to animals under the care of Ventura County Animal Services.

The Civil Grand Jury also commends the Emergency Volunteer Rescue Team (EVRT), an on-call volunteer group of Ventura County residents activated by Ventura County Animal Services during declared disasters. They assist in the evacuation of livestock and domestic animals to safe, predetermined locations. Most recently, in 2024, during the Mountain Fire, EVRT quickly mobilized and was essential in assisting Ventura County Animal Services rescue hundreds of animals of all kinds and move them quickly and safely out of the danger zone. These volunteers are giving of themselves, through selfless efforts, to provide comfort and care for animals in times of great distress.

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ATTACHMENTS

Ventura County Civil Grand Jury Document Library

<https://www.ventura.org/grand-jury/doc-library/>

- Att-01.** VCBOS Letter. (1978). Retrieved on November 15, 2024, from VCAS Archives. [Att. 01 VCBOS Letter 1978.pdf](#)
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- Att-07.** Five-Year Capital Improvement Program. (2023-2024). *Extract*. Retrieved on January 10, 2025, from County of Ventura County Executive Office. [Att. 07 Capital Project Extract.pdf](#)

- Att-08.** SLR Boilerplate. (2025-2026). Retrieved on January 12, 2025, from VCAS Archives.
[Att. 08 SLR Boilerplate 2025-2026.pdf](#)
- Att-09.** VCAS Graph: Foster and rescue group animal removal. (2012-2024). Retrieved on November 20, 2024, from VCAS Archives.
[Att. 09 VCAS-Powerpoint.pdf](#)
- Att-10.** VCAS Full Campus Plan. (2024). Retrieved on March 3, 2025, from VCAS Archives.
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DISCLAIMER

This report is issued by the 2024-2025 Ventura County Civil Grand Jury. Due to a potential conflict of interest, a member of this Civil Grand Jury was excused from participating in any aspect of the investigation or writing of this report.

GLOSSARY

TERM

DEFINITION

Ad Hoc Committee:

In a government context, an ad hoc committee is a temporary, specialized group formed to address a specific issue or problem.

Animal Control:

Animal control refers to a government entity or agency responsible for enforcing laws related to animal ownership, responding to incidents involving animals and ensuring the safety and well-being of both humans and animals.

Animal Welfare:

Animal welfare is about the quality-of-life experienced by animals, encompassing the physical and mental well-being of animals, focusing on ensuring a “life worth living” through humane and ethical treatment, encompassing aspects such as health, nutrition, environment, behavior, and mental state.

ASA:

Animal Service Agreements. The ASAs are used by Ventura County Animal Services to provide animal control, shelter facility and field services to eight Contract Cities in Ventura County.

GLOSSARY – continued**TERM****DEFINITION****Best Practices:**

In the context of animal shelters, currently recognized by the animal welfare community as the most acceptable methods, proven programs, procedures, and partnerships, designed to enhance animal welfare and increase the likelihood of live-release outcomes and ensure the best possible care, healthy environment and overall well-being of animals.

C4C:

Capacity for Care. The ability of an animal shelter to meet the needs of every animal admitted, considering factors like housing, staffing, resources, and the ability to provide humane care and achieve positive outcomes, such as adoption or transfer.

Commission:

Ventura County Animal Services Commission

Compassion Fatigue:

In the context of animal shelters, the emotional and physical exhaustion that can result from prolonged exposure to the suffering of animals and the difficult situations faced by animal welfare workers, potentially leading to burnout, cynicism, and decreased job satisfaction.

Contract Cities:

The eight cities in Ventura County that contract with Ventura County Animal Services for animal control, shelter, and field services. These cities are Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai, Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Simi Valley, and Ventura.

Field Services:

In the context of animal control, the out-of-shelter activities and responsibilities of animal control officers, encompassing tasks such as responding to complaints; rescuing animals; enforcing lease laws; reuniting lost pets with owners; providing assistance and resources to homeless individuals with pets; responding to and investigating incidents pertaining to animal cruelty and neglect; and enforcing local, state and federal laws and ordinances related to animal care.

Live Release

In the context of animal shelters, live-release is any outcome in which an animal leaves the shelter alive, rather than being euthanized or dying in the shelter. Types of live release are adoption, return to owner, return to field, and transfer out of the shelter to another shelter, group, organization, or individual.

GLOSSARY – continued**TERM****DEFINITION****Open Admission:**

An open admission shelter accepts every animal found or surrendered within its jurisdiction, regardless of age, health, breed, or temperament, and can include stray, feral, abandoned, confiscated, or owner-surrendered animals. This report defines the Open Admission model to include the shelter 90 % live-release rate.

Shelter Capacity

Animal shelter capacity refers to the number of animals a shelter can care for, considering physical space, staff resources, and the ability to provide humane care .A shelter’s capacity for humane care cannot be defined by a static number of animals or a line item in a budget. It is influenced by physical holding capacity, adoption-driven capacity, staff capacity for daily care, and number, size, and habitability of humane housing units.

Spay/Neuter Programs:

Spay/neuter programs are initiatives that offer free or subsidized surgical sterilization for animals (spaying for females and neutering for males), primarily to control pet overpopulation, address feral or stray populations, and improve animal health and well-being.

VCAS:

Ventura County Animal Services

VCBOS:

Ventura County Board of Supervisors