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July 20, 2023

RECEIVED

Honorable Carrie Stephens
Presiding Judge, Superior Court of California
County of Stanislaus
P.O. Box 3488
Modesto, CA 95353

AUG 02 2023

BY: 

Subject: Stanislaus Animal Services Agency (SASA) JPA Board Response to Improving the Lives of Animals in Stanislaus County 2022-2023 Stanislaus County Civil Grand Jury (SCCGJ) Case Number 23-14GJ

Honorable Carrie Stephens,

This letter is in response to the Stanislaus County 2022-2023 Civil Grand Jury Final Report for Case #23-14GJ, which was provided to the Stanislaus Animal Services Agency on May 25, 2023. The Stanislaus Animal Services Agency JPA Board has reviewed the findings and recommendations of the Stanislaus County Civil Grand Jury - Improving the Lives of Animals in Stanislaus County 23-14GJ. We thank the Civil Grand Jury for their efforts to raise awareness on important issues regarding animal welfare and the operational support required to provide effective services to the community and providing our agency the opportunity to respond.

The Stanislaus Animal Services Agency (SASA) joint powers agency (JPA) Board has reviewed the findings and recommendations of the report and have noted our responses below.

The responses to FINDINGS from the SASA JPA Board are as follows:

F1: The return of monies to JPA members during fiscal year true-ups reduces SCAS resources to meet its mission statement.

The SASA JPA disagrees partially with this finding.

The year-end accounting true-up is a reconciliation process that aligns budgeted amounts with actual financial performance, ensuring accurate fiscal reporting and informed decision-making. The true-up credit to partner agencies can reflect underspending in the prior year that may have impact to services; however, the true-up credit can result from additional revenues or a combination of underspending and additional revenues and is not a clear indicator on its own that it reduces resources to meet the agency's mission. The true-up process provides confidence in budget utilization and monitoring and provides partners with a credit to support future year



costs. The budget process is the primary process that reveals how designated resources will support the organization's mission.

Of note with this finding, and others, is the misinterpretation that the Stanislaus County Animal Shelter (SCAS) and Stanislaus Animal Services Agency (SASA) are one and the same. SASA is the sole name and identifier for the agency and its six-member governing authority is the SASA JPA Board. The agency does not use nor does it have any authority over any entity identified as SCAS.

F2: In FY2020-2021, as part of their true-up, SASA returned \$572,227 to JPA members.

The SASA JPA agrees with this finding.

Expenditures during FY2020-2021 were \$572,227 less than that budgeted for the fiscal year and funds contributed in excess were refunded or credited, to partners accordingly.

F3: SASA budget summary for FY2013-FY2022 indicates an unspent amount of \$3,133,521 of restricted funds to be used for spay/neuter programs.

The SASA JPA agrees with this finding.

For clarification, the \$3,133,521 figure, which is taken from Appendix D, is not a budget summary but rather appears to be a summary that reflects income from license differentials and fines, minus the amount paid for public spay/neuter vouchers and canvassing expenses. The \$3,133,521 represents an unspent amount of appropriated funds that should have been used for spay/neuter voucher programs according to Stanislaus County Code 7.20.010 sections A & C.

F4: SASA has insufficient staff to perform its operational needs.

The SASA JPA disagrees partially with this finding.

While there are numerous areas at SASA where additional staff would undoubtedly benefit the community and the animals we serve, SASA currently meets the basic minimum requirements as a municipal animal shelter and animal control agency. Economic factors, competing demands for public funds, and budgetary constraints of JPA partner agencies' governments all limit the available funding needed to expand staffing. However, in FY2022-2023, the SASA JPA took a significant step towards improvement by augmenting the staff with two full-time positions in the business office, resulting in substantial assistance and support for that department.

F5: SCAS online appointment option does not provide a reasonable time frame for spay/neuter of pets.

The SASA JPA agrees with this finding.

At present, our clinic faces obstacles in providing a substantial number of public spay/neuter appointments, particularly on days when we don't have a contract veterinarian available. These challenges primarily arise from the limitations posed by our clinic's physical space and the challenges to recruit and hire contract veterinarians.

Again, SASA does not use nor does it have any authority over any entity identified as SCAS.

F6: The foster program and the volunteer program are not prominently advertised to the public outside of their social media sites.

The SASA JPA disagrees wholly with this finding.

In addition to our social media efforts to promote our foster program and volunteer opportunities, we have adopted a comprehensive multi-channel approach to maximize visibility. These opportunities are prominently showcased within our shelter premises and extensively highlighted in press releases that have gained coverage in reputable outlets such as the Modesto Bee, channels 3, 13, 40, and 58, as well as radio stations 104.1, 105.3, and Spanish radio 88.7. Furthermore, our successful collaboration with a generous donor resulted in the funding of a mailer that reached 10,000 recipients last December, effectively promoting fostering.

As a result of these concerted marketing endeavors, we have witnessed solid expansion over the past year in both the foster and volunteer programs.

F7: SASA and SCAS social media presence is confusing and outdated.

The SASA JPA disagrees wholly with this finding.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS (Stanislaus County Animal Shelter). Considering the presence of SCAS on social media platforms, it is understandable that individuals may become confused if they were seeking information and materials related to SASA (Stanislaus Animal Services Agency).

SASA's only official social media can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/StanislausAnimalServicesAgency>

<https://www.instagram.com/stanislausanimalservices/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/stanislaus-animal-services-agency>

F8: SASA holds its board meetings in the mornings limiting public participation.

The SASA JPA disagrees partially with this finding.

The composition of the JPA Board consists of City Managers and County Executive staff members who already have commitments and scheduling constraints for evening meetings. Therefore, it would be impractical to introduce an additional night meeting that could disrupt and potentially clash with the schedules of all participating agencies.

Our practice of promptly posting meeting materials and minutes, as well as accepting public correspondence, contributes to transparency, accountability, and public participation. It ensures that stakeholders have access to relevant information and can stay informed about the discussions and decisions made during the meetings.

F9: SASA board meetings were cancelled for lack of a quorum.

The SASA JPA disagrees wholly with this finding.

The recent cancellations of SASA JPA meetings were not a result of insufficient quorum, but rather due to the absence of action items. In 2019, the JPA transitioned from quarterly meetings to monthly meetings, resulting in some months where no specific action items or compelling reasons for convening arose. Consequently, these meetings were appropriately canceled in consideration of the absence of substantial matters requiring discussion or decision-making.

F10: SCAS has a poor response time to phone calls and emails.

The SASA JPA agrees with this finding.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

In order to streamline operations and enhance efficiency, SASA took steps in 2019 to alleviate staff workload by engaging the services of a third-party vendor, DocuPet, for dog license processing. This decision proved highly beneficial, as it replaced approximately 20,000 staff transactions annually with online transactions efficiently managed by DocuPet.

Only a year ago, SASA often encountered response times for phone calls that exceeded four weeks, which was the norm. Due to budgetary constraints, SASA was unable to hire a dedicated receptionist and had to rely on available staff members to handle calls whenever they had a spare moment. Nevertheless, SASA made efforts to improve their service by expanding the business office and adding two positions last year.

As a result of these measures, the wait time for phone calls has now been reduced to approximately 7 to 10 days, marking a significant improvement in customer service. Although not ideal and still a poor response time, this represents a significant improvement in our responsiveness. Additionally, we have added a part-time extra help position dedicated to answering calls and emails.

F11: SASA Advisory Committee is currently not functioning.

The SASA JPA agrees with this finding.

Due to the impact of COVID, the Advisory Committee ceased meeting and disbanded. However, several months ago, diligent efforts were initiated to reestablish the committee. An application process has been implemented, requiring approval from the governing councils of the JPA partners. Presently, we have successfully filled 3 out of the 7 available positions. Once we have at least 4 positions filled, constituting a quorum, we will be able to resume holding Advisory Committee meetings.

F12: SASA lacks a current budget subcommittee.

The SASA JPA disagrees wholly with this finding.

SASA's budget subcommittee operates on a seasonal basis and typically forms approximately three months prior to budget approval. It is important to note that during the SCCGJ's review, there might have been a period when the subcommittee was not actively functioning.

F13: SCAS has no long-term plan for meeting the increasing demands of the shelter.

The SASA JPA disagrees partially with this finding.

This process developing a multi-year strategic plan was delayed because of the arrival of a new Executive Director at SASA. Opting to wait for a period of one to two years before developing and implementing a long-term strategic plan offers several advantages for the organization. The plan is to begin developing the multi-year strategic plan in the next six months.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

The responses to RECOMMENDATIONS from the SASA JPA Board are as follows:

R1: Unused restricted funds should stay with SCAS instead of being returned to JPA members.

Recommendation has been implemented.

Starting with the year-end reconciliation of the FY2022-2023 budget, SASA will retain funds as specified in sections A and C of county ordinance 7.20.010 for carryover and usage for those specified purposes. SASA's intention is to use the appropriated funds for public spay/neuter as they become available each year starting with the FY2023-2024 budget. However, in the event that there are unutilized funds at the end of the year, SASA plans to carry those funds over for the same purpose in the subsequent year.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R2: SASA should allocate monies in the budget to increase staffing.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

SASA operates on a highly constrained budget, making it challenging to reallocate funds specifically for increasing staffing. Doing so would require reallocating resources from other areas within the budget. SASA operates on a meticulously lean budget, where every expenditure is carefully considered. Unfortunately, due to the limited available resources, there are no viable areas to reduce funding in the budget in order to accommodate additional staffing. The JPA reviews staffing on an ongoing basis.

R3: SCAS should work to implement an active budget subcommittee.

Recommendation has been implemented.

Traditionally an ad hoc committee is requested annually by the SASA board chairman, the budget subcommittee has become a valuable means to manage the technical components of the budgeting process and will remain, meeting seasonally prior to the annual budget.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R4: SASA's budget subcommittee should include some members of the public to help provide community input of shelter needs, budget processes, and goals.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

While public participation and transparency are important principles, involving the public directly in a budget subcommittee is not practical or efficient due to the specialized expertise required, the potential impact on decision-making processes, resource

constraints, and the need for effective governance and accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, the responsibility for budget decisions and oversight lies with the governing body, the JPA Board. Involving the public directly in the budget subcommittee may blur the lines of accountability and decision-making authority, potentially undermining the proper governance of the organization.

R5: SCAS should seek ways to increase its profile by hosting promotional and fundraising events at venues outside of the shelter working in cooperation with other local animal rescue groups.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

Part of this recommendation, hosting promotional events at outside venues, SASA puts great effort to accomplish. In the past year, the new Executive Director has put a strong emphasis on enhancing public awareness. Throughout FY 2022/2023, we have actively participated in numerous off-site events, including engagements at the El Rematitio flea market, Toyota, Petco, Amazon in Turlock, East La Loma Park, as well as the county's health fair and job fair. Moreover, we have featured dogs on FOX 40 TV on a monthly basis since August, alongside regular press releases that have generated extensive media coverage across print, TV, and radio platforms.

Organizing a fundraising event with local rescue groups poses numerous obstacles and offers limited value to SASA. Given our extremely limited staff, attempting to orchestrate such an event while coordinating with rescue groups that lack sufficient personnel and rely primarily on volunteers would place an overwhelming burden on SASA. The rescue groups' expectation would be for SASA to handle all the event-related tasks and share the revenue. Interestingly, some rescue groups have approached SASA with the suggestion of us hosting a fundraiser on their behalf. Regrettably, our current staff capacity does not allow us to undertake such an endeavor.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R6: SCAS should update and unify its social media presence.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

It is crucial to reiterate that our organization, SASA, should not be confused with SCAS. SASA maintains an established and distinct social media presence under our own name. It is important to note that we do not have any authority or control over SCAS's activities on social media platforms, as SCAS is an entirely separate entity from SASA.

R7: SCAS should shorten wait times for available online appointments.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

Due to the constraints of our limited resources and minimal staff at SASA, our primary focus is on fulfilling the essential tasks necessary for the care of over 7,000 animals annually. The wait times experienced by our clients are directly related to the availability of staff and space. Despite our efforts to enhance efficiency within the existing framework, the reality is that without additional staff and/or space, reducing wait times is simply not feasible.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R8: SASA should hold its board meetings in the evenings to increase public participation.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

The composition of the JPA Board consists of City Managers and County Executive staff members who already have commitments and scheduling constraints for evening meetings. Therefore, it would be impractical to introduce an additional night meeting that could disrupt and potentially clash with the schedules of all participating agencies.

Furthermore, scheduling an evening board meeting would necessitate paying certain staff members overtime, which would impose a financial burden on SASA's already lean budget. Considering the current financial constraints, there is limited room to accommodate this additional expense.

R9: SCAS should improve communication with the public by promptly returning phone calls and emails.

Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable.

A year ago, it was commonplace for SASA to encounter response times for phone calls that often exceeded four weeks. Due to budget limitations, SASA is unable to employ a dedicated receptionist and must rely on available staff to handle calls whenever they have a moment free. However, with the addition of two positions within the business office last year the wait time for phone calls has been reduced to approximately 7 to 10 days. While this timeframe is still suboptimal and falls short of our desired responsiveness, it represents a significant improvement. Furthermore, we have recently introduced a part-time extra help position specifically dedicated to returning calls and emails. Without additional staff it is not reasonable or possible to promptly return calls and emails.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R10: SASA should implement its Advisory Committee.

Recommendation has not been implemented but will be implemented within six months.

As a result of the impact of COVID, the advisory committee had disbanded. However, in recent months, we have actively engaged in recruiting volunteers to revive the committee. To ensure a functional committee, a minimum of four individuals is required to achieve a quorum. Presently, we have successfully recruited three members and are actively pursuing the recruitment of the remaining positions to complete the committee.

R11: SCAS should conduct a survey of animal shelters within California with similar animal intake numbers and compare staffing levels.

Recommendation has not been implemented but will be implemented in the next six months.

Although a survey was conducted a year ago, and some of the findings were included in the SCCGJ report, SASA will undertake a new survey to gather updated information. We will then provide a comprehensive report to the JPA Board based on the current survey results.

Once again, it's important to clarify that our organization is not SCAS.

R12: SCAS should work with SASA to create a long-term plan that provides a clear understanding of the future of SCAS.

Recommendation has not been implemented but will be implemented in the next six months.

It seems that this recommendation stems from a misunderstanding regarding the two names SCAS and SASA. Let me reiterate that our organization is not SCAS. With that in mind, SASA will develop a comprehensive long-term plan within the next six months to outline the future trajectory of our organization.

The following points aim to clarify information that was not reflected in the report's findings or recommendations:

1. In 2019, SASA achieved and has since maintained 'no-kill' status for dogs, with a commendable live release rate ranging between 95% and 96% each year. This status requires a minimum live release rate of 90%. Similarly, SASA maintains consistently high live release rates for cats, reaching the upper 80s. The set goal is to maintain a no-kill status when possible.

2. Contrary to the report's statement, SASA has not yet procured two new vehicles for canvassing efforts. The funding for these vehicles will primarily come from grants and PFF funding sources.
3. The report mentions SASA considering contract providers, but in reality, we have already engaged contract veterinarians and vet assistants to fulfill the requirements of two spay/neuter grants. These grants specifically support the employment of these contracted professionals.
4. The report states that our website indicates we do not adopt out yellow or red list dogs. However, these animals are indeed available for public adoption, and the majority of animals listed as red or yellow eventually find loving homes through public adoption. We have revised the wording on our website to provide clarification.
5. The report inaccurately suggests that we are not currently accepting owner surrenders. In fact, we do accept owner surrenders by appointment, and the typical wait time is two to three weeks, depending on available space.
6. The report incorrectly states that no stray cat intake is allowed. However, we do accept stray cats by appointment, with a typical wait time of two to three weeks depending on available space.
7. The report mentions a stray dog intake limit of one, but in reality, it is a limit of one stray dog at a time due to space limitations.
8. The report indicates that no clinics are scheduled. However, clinics have resumed since May, and in June we held two clinics with an additional clinic scheduled for July. Our objective is to hold at least one clinic per month going forward.
9. The report suggests that numerous animals are being sent to out-of-state rescue groups without being made available to the residents of Stanislaus County. This is not the standard procedure followed by SASA. There was a unique circumstance involving a significant hoarding case of French Bulldogs, where out-of-state rescues were promptly found due to legal complexities. In all other cases, dogs transported to other shelters have already been available for adoption by residents of Stanislaus County for a significant period of time.

These clarifications aim to provide a more accurate understanding of the situation at SASA, correcting any misconceptions presented in the SCCGJ report.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'M' followed by a 'P' and a series of horizontal strokes.

Mike Pitcock
JPA Board Chair
Stanislaus Animal Services Agency