



ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL COMPLAINT REPORT

Summary

Following receipt of a complaint by county residents describing a less than optimal experience in interaction with staff at the Mendocino County Animal Care and Control (ACC), the Grand Jury attempted to verify the report and recommend steps to avoid such incidents in the future.

Background

The Mendocino County ACC Mission Statement asserts that the Department will “serve the citizens of Mendocino County by providing animal regulation services that promote public safety, health and responsible pet ownership and deliver these services in a timely, courteous, professional and cost effective manner.”

The Grand Jury responded to a citizen complaint which seemed to indicate that representatives of the Department might have acted in disregard or without knowledge of this statement. During the process of retrieving their two dogs from the Ukiah ACC, the complainants were given misinformation, treated with insensitivity and a lack of professionalism, and recovered their dead animal by entering the incinerator and removing the pet from a pile of dead animals.

Methodology

In the course of investigating the complaint, the Grand Jury interviewed ACC personnel, a local veterinarian, and the citizens who lodged the complaint. The Grand Jury also researched the Policies and Procedures manual of the Department, toured the Ukiah Animal Control facility, and consulted various records, documents and memorandums pertaining to State and County Animal control policies and ordinances.

Findings

1. Mendocino County ACC utilizes both paid staff and volunteers in the day-to-day functioning of the Ukiah facility.
2. The ACC Policy and Procedures manual was revised thirteen years ago (1992).



3. While all new ACC employees may be asked to read the Policy and Procedures within one or two weeks of hire, records indicate that verification of this reading is inconsistent.
4. ACC volunteers are not required to become familiar with the Policy and Procedures.
5. There are three microchip scanners available at the Ukiah facility to assist in pet identification, one at the front desk, one in the clinic and one in the back room where animals are euthanized.
6. An unidentified dog brought to the Ukiah facility would be scanned for a microchip within a time frame which can be as long as 24 hours.
7. A dead dog brought to the Ukiah facility might or might not be scanned for a microchip.
8. It is unclear whether a dead dog arriving at the Ukiah facility would be placed in the freezer or in the incinerator.
9. The incinerator at the Ukiah facility is kept locked and must be unlocked by a staff member for a specific purpose.
10. It is unclear whether an owner, under ACC procedures, might be allowed by an employee or a volunteer to retrieve a dead animal from the incinerator prior to a burning.
11. The incinerator at the Ukiah facility may contain, at any given time, dead animals which are color-coded as possible biohazards.
12. It is unclear whether an owner attempting to recover a dead animal would be offered, by an employee or volunteer, a plastic bag in which to carry the remains.
13. The ACC Policy and Procedures manual, as currently written, does not contain specific references to the urgency of scanning dogs immediately for a microchip and the importance of scanning all dogs received at the facility.
14. The ACC Policy and Procedures manual, as currently written, does not contain specific regulations regarding who may enter the incinerator to retrieve a dead animal.



Recommendations

1. Grand Jury recommends that all ACC employees be required to read and develop a working knowledge of the Policy and Procedures manual within two weeks of hire and that verification of this task be timely and consistent. (Findings 2,3)
2. The Grand Jury recommends that the Policy and Procedures manual distinguish between tasks that volunteers may do and tasks only to be performed by trained staff. (Findings 1,2,3,4)
3. The Grand Jury recommends that ACC volunteers become trained in and knowledgeable of those sections of the Policy and Procedures manual which pertain to tasks appropriate to their status. (Findings 1,2,4)
4. The Grand Jury recommends that relevant changes in State and County policy be immediately communicated to staff and volunteers as well as added to the Policy and Procedures manual. (Findings 1,2,3,4)
5. The Grand Jury recommends that the Policy and Procedures manual be reviewed and revised on a biannual basis by a panel of ACC employees and volunteers; the manual should be displayed and available for use by all employees, volunteers and clients of the ACC. (Findings 2,3,4,14,)
6. The Grand Jury recommends that the pages of the Policy and Procedures manual be numbered sequentially and that they be dated to reflect updates. (Finding 2)
7. The Grand Jury recommends that the Policy and Procedures manual contain clear guidelines which prevent anyone other than an ACC employee from entering the incinerator. (Findings 11,12,)
8. The Grand Jury recommends that all dogs be scanned upon arrival at the ACC facility, regardless of their condition, and that the scanning occur before a dog is placed in a cage, freezer or incinerator. (Findings 6,7,8,14)

Comments

Whatever the circumstances, the death of a pet is a difficult, often traumatic experience for the owner. The treatment of a bereaved owner by a government



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agency which must often deal with such incidents should be, at the very least, professional.

Two owners living outside Ukiah Valley learned from other sources that their two dogs, one unharmed and one dead, had been taken by an ACC employee to the city facility. They left phone messages indicating their desire to retrieve both pets. Although both dogs carried microchips, there is no indication that either was scanned at the Ukiah facility. Upon arrival, they were told at the reception desk that the dead dog was in the freezer. Indeed, the Grand Jury was told that an identified dead animal would be kept in the freezer until the owner is reached, then released to the owner or burned.

When one of the owners was directed to the rear of the facility, he was told by another staff member that his animal was in the incinerator. The door was opened, his dead pet was pointed out, and the owner himself entered the incinerator to retrieve the dog. He was not offered, as a courtesy, a container such as a large plastic bag in which to carry the remains to his car.

The Grand Jury recognizes the important and necessary work of Animal Care and Control workers. Spaying and neutering programs, the rescue of strays, organization and promotion of the adoption process are all vital services to this community. The Grand Jury believes, however, that those services would be improved by clear and concise guidelines in a Policy and Procedures manual disseminated to all staff members and volunteers.

Finally, when saddened owners arrive at the facility to recover a dead pet, Mendocino County citizens expect courtesy and professionalism from ACC employees and volunteers. The Grand Jury would hope, in addition, that such clients be shown sensitivity and understanding.

Response Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors

Response Requested

Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer
Director, Department of Animal Care and Control