

PRESS-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

Long Beach animals under stress as shelter's resources strained, audit finds



By [COURTNEY TOMPKINS](#) | ctompkins@scng.com | Press Telegram
December 27, 2017 at 9:03 am

0 COMMENTS

The Long Beach animal shelter has been without a clear system for housing, caring for and treating impounded animals, which has resulted in “inconsistent decision making” and “changes being implemented without proper direction or explanation,” according to an audit of the city-run facility.

The first phase of a two-part audit of the Animal Care Services bureau includes 173 recommendations (short- and long-term) to improve conditions at the shelter and outcomes for the animals. It is the first comprehensive analysis of shelter operations, according to City Auditor Laura Doud, who hired a consultant with expertise in animal welfare to do the study.

The report, done by JVR Shelter Strategies, made recommendations across 14 categories, including animal care, veterinary services and euthanasia practices. Among them are suggestions to create a system to track animals as well as a plan for each one, upgrade housing conditions for cats, dogs, rabbits and exotic animals, and craft policies for daily cleaning and feeding.

Overall, the report found a “misalignment” between expected service levels and the shelter’s capacity to provide care has strained staffing and resources, and recommends the shelter not operate outside its means in the future. It also recommends creating a strategic plan with clear policies to make life less stressful for both the staff and animals and improve efficiency.

“Clearly defined operating procedures provide a consistent, documented standard of care that is transparent both internally and externally,” the report read.

Officials say this puts the city at a “critical juncture” where it needs to determine what kind of shelter it wants to run.

“We expect this report will serve as a guide as the city and other stakeholders make important decisions to take Animal Care Services to the next chapter,” Doud said in a statement.

Doud jointly announced the findings at a recent press conference with Mayor Robert Garcia, who called for the audit earlier this year after [facing pressure](#) from animal advocates, and Parks, Recreation and Marine Director Marie Knight, whose department oversees the Animal Care Services bureau.

At the meeting, Garcia praised the shelter's historically low euthanasia rates, which [have steadily declined](#) in recent years, but "we can do even better," he said. Animal advocates have been critical of what they say are still high kill rates compared to other progressive cities such as Sacramento, which adopts out thousands of animals from its shelter each year.

The Long Beach ACS bureau impounds approximately 8,000 animals each year. As an open intake shelter, staff cannot turn away animals. All impounded animals are kept until the mandatory holding period, between three to 14 days, before they are either euthanized or transferred to a rescue organization for adoption.

For the past 16 years, ACS has partnered with Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (spcaLA) to jointly deliver adoption services to Long Beach, Cerritos, Seal Beach, Signal Hill and Los Alamitos. ACS and spcaLA are housed at the P.D. Pitchford Companion Animal Village in east Long Beach, near the El Dorado Nature Center.

Under the informal agreement, however, spcaLA is not required to take a designated number of animals. Animals not selected by spcaLA, often cats and dogs that sometimes have challenging behavior or medical issues, remain under ACS care.

The audit recommends the city execute a formal agreement that lays out some of these terms. The regional nonprofit organization, spcaLA, has taken 1,717 animals from ACS this year.

ACS also partners with community nonprofits and rescue groups to find homes for animals. In 2017, it had agreements with 118 different providers.

The number of animals taken by these groups, however, has tripled in the past five years, up from 514 in 2012 to 1,664 year-to-date in 2017. During that same time, impound rates have decreased by several thousand and euthanasia rates have also dropped.

Animal advocacy groups [have been critical](#) of the city's approach to animal care for years, citing high kill rates and low adoption rates. During the most recent budget cycle, dozens of animal advocates pleaded with the city to allocate more resources to the shelter and streamline inconsistent practices that prove barriers to animal adoption.

Among them is Stayin' Alive Long Beach, an advocacy group whose aim is to make Long Beach a "no kill" city. In a statement released on Friday, Stayin' Alive said the audit reveals a mismanaged shelter with multiple problems.

“We were dismayed to see that many of the most basic practices in shelter operations, animal care and veterinary care are not being put in place by management at the shelter,” said group spokeswoman Patricia Turner, who influenced some of the recommendations in the report.

While the report makes many solid recommendations, she said, Stayin’ Alive is concerned that euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals is listed as a solution when resources are strained. There is also worry that the improvements are tied to resources, which continue to be slim. The shelter operates on an approximately \$5 million annual budget, 75 percent of which pays for staffing needs.

The group is calling on the city to create its own adoption program rather than relying on spcaLA or outside organizations, which Turner says could boost live release rates and further decrease the kill rate.

Officials blame a lack of resources for many of the limitations, but say they will work to address some of the financial need in the upcoming budget cycle.

In fiscal year 2017, Long Beach allocated \$50,000 to jumpstart the strategic planning process as well as adding two positions: one registered veterinary technician and one social media marketing person to communicate with the public about impounded and adoptable animals.

Knight said via email that the department has already begun to implement a number of recommendations, including some that were underway before the audit concluded.

For example, the shelter has written new policies for housing exotic animals and is currently updating all cat housing. Staff are also working to streamline some policies related to daily treatment and medical prioritization, among many others, she said.

Doud will complete the second phase this year, which takes a look at staffing and resource needs. Knight says she expects it to confirm what they have known for a long time: “That we are below the standard staffing levels in many areas.” She said the department will work to implement those recommendations “that are achievable within current resources.”