May 21, 2008

This report may be of interest to you, especially in light of all the attention given recently to our community’s extreme pet overpopulation and resulting high kill rate in our animal control shelters.

Many of the problem areas mentioned in this report are clearly the result of pet overpopulation. But other highly disturbing situations are the direct result of shelter administrators ignoring repeated pleas to improve shelter situations where animals are horribly abused.

The one that bothers me the most is the feral cat situation, detailed on pages 27 and 28. Note that a plan even exists to correct the torture of these cats. Costs to improve the situation would not be great. It is simply chilling to realize the only reason these animals must continue to suffer is the shelter administrators’ refusal to act.

I have sent copies of this report to all the Supervisors, as well as a cover letter asking that Ms. Denise Haynes be removed from any and all animal control duties immediately. It’s impossible for me to just stand by and not make an effort to help.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Stewart
This report follows informal shelter animal health consultations and visits with the Kern County Animal Shelter by the University of California-Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program. Dr. Sandra Newbury visited the shelter in January and again in November of 2007. A short list of verbal, high priority recommendations were made after the initial visit in January. In November, a decision was made to develop a limited written report with recommendations focusing on population management at the shelter. Data used for this report was supplied by the shelter or collected from the shelter’s Chameleon database with assistance from Chameleon.

OVERVIEW
Overall, it was apparent during both visits that a significant disparity exists between the apparent goals and expectations of the Kern County community, California legislative goals, and the facilities, programs and staff currently in place at Kern County Animal Shelter (KCAS). Although many staff members were clearly dedicated and caring, and in some cases were exerting heroic efforts to provide for the animals in the shelter, it was evident that the capacity of programs, staff and facility was exceeded in almost every area of animal housing and care. The result was a breakdown in care leading to illness, animal suffering, and likely un-necessarily high levels of euthanasia and death.

Meeting the expectations of the Kern County community will require not only improvements in the care and management of animals currently passing through the shelter, it will also require a reduction of intake and/or increased live release (through increased adoptions, rescue/transfer, or reclaim by owner). This cannot be realistically achieved without substantial additional financial and programmatic investment in both the shelter and in community-directed programs (e.g. spay/neuter outreach or feral diversion programs). Additional comments on community level programs are beyond the scope of this report but such programs will be critical to implementing legislative goals as well as creating a healthy and safe shelter environment.

PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES
Three significant programmatic issues were identified which underlie many other problems: 1.) A lack of clear goals for the division; 2.) A lack of systems for animal care and management coupled with an organizational/staffing structure insufficient to support development, implementation, and enforcement of such systems; and 3.) Absence of a comprehensive and effective population management plan: no defined maximum level of capacity in any area, absence of a functional plan for what to do should intake exceed the shelter’s capacity to provide minimally acceptable levels of care, lack of supervision or accountability for animal flow-through, and insufficient capacity of current staffing levels, physical housing units, and programs to care for even the most basic, minimally required legal holding periods for stray animals. These programmatic issues must be resolved in order to implement additional improvements. Many of the improvements
suggested may work synergistically to benefit many shelter systems. Attempting to address specific concerns without a holistic approach to solving problems inherent to the current system will not be fruitful.

SECTION I: Goals
On several occasions administrators for the Kern County Animal Shelter have expressed uncertainty about the goals for the division. The primary strategic goal that was consistently articulated was to meet requirements and avoid further violations to rules defined by state law, county ordinance, and a settlement agreement from a previous lawsuit. The shelter struggles to be in compliance with the resolution and settlement of a previous lawsuit and legislation which limits euthanasia but does not provide assistance with programs to decrease intake or increase live release. Some level of community expectation is also reportedly communicated regularly to the shelter through individuals, rescue groups and the Kern County Veterinary Medical Association (KCVMA).

Problems identified:
- The shelter struggles to remain in compliance with current legislation as well as other legal obligations.
- No “Big Picture” set of goals has been identified to help drive the department or set performance measures.

Recommendations:
- Develop and articulate comprehensive strategic goals.
- Use those goals to develop strategic plans, communicate and work with the community, and set performance measures.

SECTION II: Support Structure for Animal Care and Management Systems
The current organizational structure does not appear sufficient to support development, implementation or enforcement of well-thought-out animal health care systems/procedures. Staff members were unclear how their positions fit into the organizational chart. Many staff members reported they had never seen an organizational chart.

Recommendations from outside consultants will have little benefit if there is no structure in place to implement those recommendations. Designated personnel must have sufficient time, authority and accountability in order to establish and maintain functional systems. Staff must also have accountability and supervision for their daily responsibilities. Policies and practices should reflect current standards in the sheltering profession and incorporate information available through continuing education resources, professional organizations, relevant journals and online resources. Where appropriate, input should be sought from outside sources including experts, colleagues and other community stakeholders.

Problems identified:
- It is unclear which staff members, or combination of staff members, are responsible for defining animal care protocols and systems.
➢ It is unclear which staff members, or combination of staff members, are responsible for ensuring those defined practices are implemented.

➢ It is unclear how the veterinarian and veterinary team fit into the organizational structure of the shelter.

➢ It is unclear which staff members currently have the authority and supervisory responsibility for population management in the shelter.

➢ There appears to be no functional system for supervision of animal care staff when making flow-through decisions or accountability if staff fail to act on decisions that have been made.

➢ There appear to be no functional systems in place to help staff make sound decisions when there is conflict between community or legislative expectations and adequacy of care, animal health or animal welfare.

Recommendations:

➢ Establish a clear organizational structure for all staff defining roles, responsibilities, lines of supervision, authority, and accountability.

➢ Identify current personnel with sufficient background and ability to write/review critical animal population management protocols including those described in this report. This may include management staff, veterinary staff, and senior/experienced animal care staff. Hire additional relief staff to assist in day-to-day activities such that designated staff have sufficient time to complete critical protocol development.

➢ Develop and document a process by which new and existing procedures will be communicated and implemented, including timing and responsibility for staff training and accountability. Hire additional relief staff if necessary to allow training of current staff.

➢ Designate a population manager with authority and accountability to evaluate and minimize shelter crowding, respond to animal welfare issues, and ensure that animals move promptly and efficiently through the shelter system without delays each day.

➢ Immediately define a strategic plan and set of guidelines for what to do when there is conflict between community or legislative expectations and adequacy of animal care, animal health or animal welfare.
SECTION III: Population Management

(Population management includes an evaluation of current and historical population dynamics and the systematic processes or policies in place to help animals move through the system with good health and welfare. Population management includes an evaluation of both the health and welfare of the group as a whole and the individuals who make up the group.)

Part One: Shelter Population Dynamics
Part Two: Capacity
Part Three: Separation and isolation
Part Four: Length of shelter stay, animal care days, and daily in-shelter animal Population

Population management at KCAS was identified as the focus of this consultation because these systematic processes and management policies are the foundation for making improvements in health and welfare for the animals in need of care and sheltering in Kern County.

The statistics reported here use data collected from the KCAS Chameleon database as well as monthly reports generated for the Kern County Board of Supervisors. In some cases, this close evaluation of statistics has identified possible problems with data collection. A consultation with Chameleon has been recommended in order to problem solve and streamline the data collection and reporting system for the shelter. If errors in calculation or data collection are identified, these statistics can be updated to reflect those corrections. While data collection streamlining may help to make data more accurate it is unlikely to substantially change the overall picture represented by the data described here.

Sec.III PART ONE: Shelter Population Dynamics

Shelter Intake
Live release compared to intake
Live Release
Euthanasia practices and definitions

(This section evaluates the current and historical shelter population dynamics in an effort to identify challenges that must be overcome to improve welfare and live release for lost or homeless animals in the Kern County community.)

Shelter intake
For Kern County, intake statistics evaluation will focus primarily on stray intake. Although there are 3 separate shelter facilities statistical information will be presented as one because there was no system in place for effectively separating information by facility.
In 2007 (year to date through October), stray dogs make up 88.2% of the total canine intake into the shelter. Surrendered dogs are the next most significant fraction. Numbers for surrenders represent only 8.3% of the total canine intake.

Stray cats make up 94.1% of the total feline intake into the shelter. Surrendered cats are the next most significant fraction. Surrendered cats represent 4.6% of the total feline intake.

DOGS
Stray dog intake was higher each month in 2007 compared to 2006 through the end of October. Surrendered dog numbers have been slightly lower in most months of 2007 compared to 2006. Since strays make up the majority of canine intake into the shelter, this increased intake has placed a significant additional burden on shelter resources, staffing and physical space. By the end of October 2007, 2,525 more stray dogs had presented to the shelter than in 2006 representing a 23% year to date increase in stray intake. (Figure 1 and 2)

This increased intake was also evident for stray puppies under the age of 5 months in 2007 compared with 2006. The increase is especially notable after May. An increase of 414 more stray puppies presented to the shelter year-to-date through October of 2007 compared with the same time period in 2006 representing a 20% increase in that category. (Figure 3)
It is possible that the apparent increase in puppy intake is a result of recording errors by staff entering dog information into the system. The division chief and the shelter veterinarian have both noted difficulties with compliance of staff entering complete information into the system. In 2006, 45% of stray dogs entered into Chameleon had no age recorded. In 2007, only 34% of stray dogs had no age entered into Chameleon by staff. It is not possible to know what proportion of those dogs whose ages were not entered were puppies.

Fluctuations in entry of juvenile animals into the shelter can be an important gauge of overpopulation in the community. If spay/neuter efforts in the community are successful, a decline in the numbers of juvenile animals would be expected. Increasing juvenile animal intake suggests population control (overpopulation) issues in the community. Monitoring the intake numbers for juvenile animals also helps planning so that appropriate housing accommodations can be made.

CATS

Stray cat intake was similar but slightly lower in 2007 compared to 2006 through the end of October. (Figure 4) Surrendered cat numbers have also been slightly lower in 2007 compared to 2006. By the end of October 2007, 390 fewer stray cats had presented to the shelter than in 2006 representing a 4% year to date decrease in stray intake. 24 fewer cats were surrendered representing a 5% year to date decrease from 2006. While these decreases are encouraging, intake of stray cats has remained high and creates a significant burden on shelter resources, staff time and available housing.
Kitten intake
Kitten intake has increased even while the overall number of cats coming in has decreased. (Figure 5) While again, some of this apparent intake change may be due to reporting errors, it is important to monitor both the ratio and the absolute numbers of juvenile animals in order to get an indication of the population dynamics for the community. Monitoring the intake numbers for juvenile animals also helps planning so that appropriate housing accommodations can be made.
Juvenile animals are more difficult to keep healthy, especially in a shelter setting. Increasing intake of juvenile animals creates additional stresses for a shelter system. Puppies and kittens increase the risk of disease transmission for the other individuals in the shelter and the group as a whole. At the same time, puppies and kittens may be more in demand by adopters, and so may be more easily placed if they can get through the shelter system in good health. Monitoring basic intake statistics for puppies and kittens also helps us make plans for those animals before they come to us as well as monitoring effects of interventions to reduce community overpopulation. (Please see intake daily averages section below.)

Feral cat intake
Records were not available to differentiate feral cat intake from socialized cat intake. However, an increase in euthanasia within the feral category of 484 cats was seen in 2007, representing a 24% increase compared to 2006. Since, at this time, euthanasia is the expected outcome for cats identified as feral at the KCAS, these euthanasia numbers suggest an associated increase in feral intake.

Recommendations:
Outreach and Diversion
➢ Consider forming a task force in the community to develop programs that may help to reduce shelter intake and numbers of stray animals in the community.

Spay / Neuter
➢ Consider implementing county or grant supported low cost spay / neuter community outreach.
➢ Consider implementing a self-sustainable low cost spay / neuter program in Kern County.
➢ Consider partnering with other community organizations and the KCVMA to apply for spay / neuter grant funding from Maddie’s Fund. Because the live release rate for Kern County falls near 40%, Maddie’s Fund has said Kern County would be eligible to apply for their new targeted spay / neuter grant. (http://www.maddiesfund.org/grant/targeted_spay_neuter.html) This grant application may be quite involved but would offer funding of $200,000 over a two-year period.

Monitoring
➢ Monitor and report intake statistics both to the Board of Supervisors and to the community as a whole.
  ○ Monitoring and reporting intake numbers allows for better accounting of animal statistics.
  ○ Communicating intake figures helps demonstrate:
    ▪ Overall burden on shelter resources
    ▪ Effectiveness of spay/neuter, intervention, diversion or outreach programs
➢ Arrange for a consultation with Chameleon to develop consistent data entry systems and training to more effectively use the database.
➢ Change age to a required field for intake in Chameleon.
  o Consider adding a category of “below 5 months” (below 5 months, Adult, Senior) so that staff may feel more comfortable with estimating age.
  o Adult canine teeth erupt near 5 months of age.
➢ Add an intake category for “FERAL” so that feral cat intake can be tracked separately.
  o Daily intake averages for feral cats would allow planning of appropriate capacity for feral housing.
  o Interventions to reduce feral intake or improve live release vary from those designed to reduce intake of socialized cats.
  o Outcome expectations vary between feral cats and socialized cats.
    ▪ Live release for ferals, most commonly, would be based on a trap / neuter / return (TNR) program or outdoor placement.
    ▪ Euthanasia may be currently dictated by animal control ordinance.

Budget Evaluation
➢ Recognize that increased intake creates a significant burden and drain on all shelter resources.
➢ Re-evaluate allocation of resources to appropriately accommodate increases in animal intake and associated increases in required care and staffing hours.
➢ Consider costs of increasing intake when weighing costs of intake diversion programs. In many cases, the costs of preventive diversionary programs may save resources in the long run.