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Opinion

Sunday, Jul 27, 2008

Opinion

Posted on Sun, Jul. 27, 2008

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Editorial: Stop the barking and biting at county Animal Services

Humane Society offers good tips on healing rift at troubled agency

By Opinion of The Tribune

We're not huge fans of long-winded, government-funded studies, which too often wind up filed and forgotten.

But the county was right on target when it hired the Humane Society of the United States to examine the inner workings of county Animal Services, which has come under fire recently from members of the public and especially from volunteers.

We commend the thoroughness of the Humane Society report; we believe it was well worth the \$22,874 investment.

Now, we urge county officials to move forward to correct some of the troubling deficiencies and dysfunctions outlined in the study.

If that requires appointment of a task force to review the many proposals in the study—as the report recommends—we're on board with that.

Before we delve into the shortcomings uncovered in the report, it's important to note that not all was negative; the Humane Society found several areas to praise.

We were especially impressed by the shelter's low kill rate, which is figured on a per-capita basis. In 2006, there were two cases of animal euthanasia per 1,000 people in San Luis Obispo County, compared to the national average of 14.8 per 1,000 people.

That was good news, given the recent allegations against the agency, which include complaints about incompetent employees, mistreatment of animals and accusations that some animals were needlessly destroyed.

The complaints weren't one-sided; staff members complained about the disruptive behavior of some volunteers.

While the Humane Society study doesn't dwell on back-and-forth accusations — and that's good — it does provide background and context, telling us that communications between the two groups "had deteriorated to the point that open criticism from both parties was customary."

The report recommends several steps to improve the situation. Here are some:

- Hire a full-time volunteer coordinator responsible for recruiting, screening, training and supervising volunteers;
- Prepare and distribute a policy and procedures manual for volunteers;
- Re-establish a volunteer advisory committee;
- Develop a written grievance procedure;
- Establish detailed job descriptions for volunteer assignments, and track volunteer hours; and
- Develop an employee-recognition program.

Some changes already have been implemented. For example, a volunteer manual has been completed, and Animal Services is in the process of developing job descriptions for volunteer assignments.

That's a good start, and we urge the county to move forward with other low-and no-cost improvements as quickly as possible.

However, some of the changes are big-ticket items that will be more difficult to implement.

As much as we would like to see a full-time volunteer coordinator, it's hard to justify such an expense when the county faces a multimillion-dollar budget shortfall.

That's why the task force will play an invaluable role. It should carefully evaluate the recommendations, develop a cost estimate for each one and come up with a plan of action.


Bottom line: In an area such as animal welfare, it's inevitable that some conflicts will arise. Well-meaning people can disagree about the level of care and treatment that should be provided, particularly when sick, injured or hard-to-place animals are concerned.

But when the level of hostility deteriorates to the point where two sides are filing written complaints against each other, it's hard to imagine that volunteers would be interested in signing on or remaining in such a stressful environment. That's regrettable, because committed volunteers are a tremendous resource, especially in such a labor-intensive field as animal services.


The Humane Society study is a good first step in healing the rift. We urge the county to follow through by appointing a task force, developing a plan of action and implementing it as expeditiously as possible.



TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON
The animal euthanasia rate for County Animal Services is much lower than the national average, the Humane Society of the United States reports.

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