



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2017-2018

Animal Care/Animal Control

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2017-2018 Solano County Grand Jury

I. SUMMARY

According to the Solano County Code regulating dog ownership, “all dogs over the age of four months must be vaccinated for rabies and licensed with Solano County within 30 days of ownership/possession or new residence in the county. Persons living in unincorporated areas of the County are also required to license their dogs.” In addition, dogs within the county are required to wear the license tag at all times.

The 2017-2018 Solano County Grand Jury (SCGJ) investigation of the issue of animal care and animal control in the county revealed that despite state and county regulations, the required licensing earned very little attention from enforcement entities and is currently dependent on pet owners’ voluntary compliance with the law. Although there are no apparent solid numbers available, pet owners and law enforcement entities responsible for administration of license regulations admit that the percentage of licensed dogs in the county is very low.

II. INTRODUCTION

According to the Humane Society of the North Bay, approximately ten thousand humans are born in the United States each day and during that same span of time seventy thousand puppies and kittens are born. The one to seven birth ratios make it impossible to provide adequate housing for all the cats and dogs born daily. In addition, rabies is a constant health threat for pets and humans. Animal licensing helps the County monitor compliance with local and state rabies vaccination laws. It also helps Animal Control identify lost pets and aids in county efforts to return the animals to their owners. This process is designed to promote responsible pet ownership and to reduce the tragedies associated with lost pets and pet overpopulation. Further, the fees accrued from licensing help support the care of animals at the County shelter and pay the costs of investigations into complaints about stray, vicious and abused animals, as well as other services.

In the past year, there have been incidents of well-publicized animal cruelty which raised anxiety among pet owners. These incidents drew the attention of the 2017-2018 Solano County Grand Jury. The last time that animal care/animal control was examined by the Grand Jury was in 2012-2013. At that time, it found that “the delivery of services is fragmented, inefficient and confusing to the public. These services would better serve the public if consolidated.” The current Grand Jury found that consolidation of animal care/animal control is still an issue and the public is still confused.

III. METHODOLOGY

Interviewed

Solano County Sheriff's Department Administrators
Benicia Police Department Administrators
City of Suisun City Police Department Administrators
Solano Animal Control Authority
Fairfield Police Department Administrators
Rio Vista Police Department Administrators
Vacaville Police Department Administrators
Vallejo City Administrators
Humane Animal Services Administrators
Napa Solano County Veterinary Medical Association
Private Citizens
Former President of the American Veterinary Medical Association

Toured

Solano County Animal Control Facility

Reviewed

State Animal Regulations
County Animal Regulations
Pet Data Website
PetData Contract
Contract between Solano Animal Control Authority (SACA) & Humane Animal Services (HAS)
Vallejo Municipal Code
Solano County Animal Care Service Website
City of Vallejo Website
Pet Harbor.com
Laws and Regulations Relating to Rabies, Excerpts from the California Health and Safety Code and the California Code of Regulations
Concerns voiced through social media
Previous Solano County Civil Grand Jury Reports
Licensing in other cities, counties and states

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

The focus of this report is on how Solano County handles animal care and animal control issues. A primary concern is the lack of consistency among agencies in dealing with animals and licensing.

There are three major entities providing animal control for domestic animals in the county: Sheriff's Department, Benicia Police Department and Humane Animal Services (HAS). The animal care facilities include Humane Society of the North Bay in Vallejo, Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Vacaville and the Solano County Animal Shelter in Fairfield. Benicia has a holding cage for rescued animals. They are held there while the police department searches for the animal's owners. Otherwise the animals are transported to the Humane Society of the North Bay or to the Solano County Animal Shelter. The sheriff's animal control officers take their animals directly to the county shelter as does HAS.

The 2017-2018 SCGJ encountered a lack of trust that most members of SACA, the joint powers authority that provides animal control for five cities (Vacaville, Fairfield, Dixon, Rio Vista and City of Suisun City) have for Humane Animal Services, the contracted service provider. The concerns arise from the apparent lack of transparency in the financial information that HAS provides. The lack of timely information makes the SACA members concerned with how their monies for animal control are used.

When SACA was originally formed, it was mostly comprised of city managers. SACA contracted with HAS to handle animal control. However, the group of city managers turned control of SACA over to the police departments of the contracting cities. (Benicia's police department handles that city's animal issues while Vallejo contracts with the Solano County Sheriff's Office.) In interviews with the 2017-2018 SCGJ, many of the members of SACA indicated a lack of confidence in HAS. Although they had no real issues with the day-to-day activities of the agency, they expressed trepidation concerning the lack of transparency of the financial side of the contract. They voiced concerns as to whether the funds they supply to the non-profit are being used in the appropriate manner (i.e. updating facilities, training personnel, updating equipment [specifically the animal control trucks]).

Anecdotal evidence provided by Solano County residents prompted the Grand Jury to inquire into the process for licensing animals within the county. Information presented to the Grand Jury demonstrated a lack of interest to the point that pet owners were sometimes turned away when they tried to get their animals licensed. The inconsistency of rules among the various agencies for licensing pets is confusing. City managers, sheriff's office and police department representatives claim they direct their efforts toward educating the public on the licensing process.

Licenses can be obtained by applying online via petdata.com. Petdata is a Texas based company that the County contracts to process licenses. The county pays Petdata one hundred thousand dollars for each year's license processing services as part of a three year contract. Pet owners submit a rabies vaccination certificate or Solano County renewal notice if the pet's rabies vaccinations are still current and a spay/neuter certificate if applicable. Owners can also apply for licenses at the following locations:

- Benicia
 - Police Department's non-emergency number at (707) 745-3412
 - City Hall
 - Humane Society of the North Bay

- Dixon
 - City Hall, 600 East A Street

- Fairfield
 - Dog license (707) 784-1357; Solano County Sheriff's Office Animal Care Services at 2510 Clay Bank Road
- Rio Vista
 - Rio Vista Police Department at 55 Poppy House Road
- City of Suisun City
 - Solano County Sheriff's Office Animal Care Services at 2510 Clay Bank Road, Fairfield
- Vacaville:
 - Vacaville City Hall - Finance counter, 650 Merchant Street
 - Vacaville Police Department - Lobby, 660 Merchant Street
 - Solano SPCA, 2200 Peabody Road
- Vallejo:
 - City of Vallejo Cashier's Office, Vallejo City Hall, 555 Santa Clara Street, First Floor
 - Humane Society of the North Bay, 1121 Sonoma Boulevard
- In addition, all cities and unincorporated areas can license:
 - Through the mail
 - Solano County Animal Shelter
 - Online at petdata.com

California Health & Safety Code section 121690 requires dogs that attain the age of 4 months be licensed and wear a collar to which an identification or license tag is attached. The Solano County Licensing Ordinance follows the state statute but adds "...within thirty days of ownership/possession or new residence in Solano County." A dog that is found running at large without the identification tag or dog license tag may be seized and impounded.

As an example of a confusing situation, Rio Vista goes a step further by restricting the window of time that pet owners can submit their applications. The Rio Vista Municipal Code Title Six Chapter 6.12.050 Licensing of dogs states:

- “B. The license shall be procured between July 1st and August 31st annually. The license shall be valid beginning on July 1st and ending on June 30th.
- C. The fee for dog licenses shall be determined and set by resolution of the Rio Vista city council.
- D. Upon a puppy becoming four months of age, a license shall be obtained therefor; however, the fee shall be prorated on a semi-annual basis.
- E. New residents shall obtain licenses for their dogs, and the license fee shall be prorated on a semi-annual basis. New residents who possess valid licenses that expire on the same date as licenses provided in this section, shall be issued a courtesy license in exchange for the aforesaid license upon payment of a fee as determined and set by resolution of the Rio Vista city council. New residents who possess valid licenses that will expire prior to the normal

expiration date for licenses provided in this section shall pay a prorated share for the remaining portion of the licensing period.

F. Residents who obtain dogs after the penalty-fee licensing period (July and August) shall obtain a license based on the semi-annual pro rata basis. (Ord. 587 § 1, 2002; prior code § 4-123)”

Although each city within the county addresses licensing differently, in Solano County, the SCGJ discovered the full responsibility of licensing falls on the pet owners. Failure to license can carry severe penalties. For example:

An examination of Sec. 4-57 of the Solano County Ordinance § 4-170 Enforcement and penalties reveals “(b) Any person who violates the provisions of this article shall, upon conviction in Superior Court of Solano County, be fined not less than five hundred dollars (\$500.00) and not more than one thousand dollars (\$1000.00). The fine shall be paid to the animal control for the purpose of defraying the cost of implementing this article. The court may also impose a jail term not to exceed thirty (30) calendar days.” However, the SCGJ was informed leniency in applying penalties is common.

Having a dog vaccinated against rabies is connected to licensing. The first line of defense in addressing the health and safety of family pets are the veterinarians within the county, yet there are limited attempts to create a cooperative, collaborative effort to ensure that pets in Solano County are licensed. In an interview with a former president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, the SCGJ found that there are some communities in the United States that have formed collaborative efforts with their local veterinary associations to promote licensing. Following that effort, the veterinarians included standard licensing fees with the fees charged for the rabies vaccination and issued the appropriate license and tags immediately. For their efforts, the veterinarians retained a portion of the licensing fee. At least one Texas county that adopted this process found the number of licensed dogs in the area increased significantly. An officer of the Napa Solano County Veterinary Medical Association indicated that such a program could be beneficial to Solano County.

The lack of consistency and user friendly communication exacerbates the issue of contacting appropriate animal care/animal control agency. There is confusion on which entity should be contacted when there is a problem. The recent drought brought many of the larger predatory animals into urban areas, yet complainants often found they called the wrong number for help. Animal control issues are divided according to the kind of animal involved:

- Wild animals such as mountain lions, coyotes, deer etc. come under the purview of the Fish and Wildlife Department.
- Domestic animals are the responsibility of HAS, the police departments or the sheriff’s department, depending on the city where the concern is and the time of day the issue is reported.
- During business hours, HAS handles calls regarding domestic animals in Dixon, Fairfield, Rio Vista, City of Suisun City, and Vacaville.

- After business hours, the local police departments handle the calls for those cities.
- The Sheriff’s Department handles all calls for Vallejo and the unincorporated areas in the county.
- The Benicia Police Department handles calls for its city.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1 – Members of Solano Animal Control Authority (SACA) indicated concern with the contract and lack of cooperation from Humane Animal Services (HAS) in providing appropriate fiscal information.

Recommendation 1 - SACA, the contracting party, review, renegotiate and rethink the existing contract. SACA send out requests for proposals to find an agency that provides appropriate fiscal information.

Finding 2 – Licensing is the law, not a choice. All interviewed enforcement agencies admitted that implementing licensing laws is a low priority.

Recommendation 2 – Law enforcement agencies review policies and ensure that pet owners are aware of and follow the state, county and city regulations.

Finding 3 – Animal Care/Animal Control services in Solano County are not consistent or easily accessed.

Recommendation 3 – The cities in Solano County develop a communication system that connects all responding agencies and allows citizens to access needed assistance with a single call.

Finding 4 – There is no effective program in Solano County to ensure animal license enforcement and compliance.

Recommendation 4 - The cities and the county collaborate on a plan to address license enforcement and compliance.

Finding 5 - Veterinarians are the first line of defense in addressing the health and safety of family pets, yet there is no effort to create a collaborative program to ensure that pets in Solano County are licensed.

Recommendation 5 – Solano Animal Control Authority (SACA) work with the Napa Solano County Veterinary Medical Association to create a program to increase the number of licensed animals in Solano County.

COMMENTS

Depending on pet owners to voluntarily license their pets has proven to be ineffective. The county and the cities within the county need to:

- A. Create a method that allows for consistent licensing applications throughout the county.
- B. Develop public educational programs on the importance of pet licensing.
- C. Enforce existing laws.

REQUIRED RESPONSES (ALL FINDINGS)

Solano County Animal Control Authority (SACA)
Solano County Sheriff’s Department Administrators
Benicia Police Department Administrators
City of Suisun City Police Department Administrators
Dixon Police Department Administrators
Fairfield Police Department Administrators
Rio Vista Police Department Administrators
Vacaville Police Department Administrators
Vallejo City Administrators

COURTESY COPIES

Humane Animal Services (HAS) Administrator
Napa Solano County Veterinary Medical Association
Humane Society of the North Bay
Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals