

To: Sangamon County Board; Sangamon County Board of Health

From: Gail O'Neill, Director, Sangamon County Department of Public Health

Date: May 23, 2022

Subject: Operation and Policy Changes at the Sangamon County Animal Control and Adoption Center

Tonight, at the Public Health Oversight Committee, I presented a series of operational and policy changes to the Sangamon County Animal Control and Adoption Center. The changes, some of which are already in effect, are the results of the facility's 6-month evaluation and review. With these new policies and procedures, animal control will provide a better service to residents and the animals in our care.

In late 2021, sensational allegations of criminal animal abuse and neglect at animal control arose on social media. In addition to criminal allegations, disinformation was spread about the condition of the facility, and attempts were made to vilify animal control staff, veterinarians, and County officials. Claims of a structurally unsafe building, black mold, animals not receiving basic care or nutrition, and even claims of animal abuse directly by staff, elected officials, and their family members. All of which would be proven false and, in some instances, intentionally deceitful.

The County immediately requested an independent investigation by the Illinois State Police, the Illinois Department of Agriculture, and the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, the department responsible for regulating and certifying euthanasia technicians. Within a month, animal control passed two surprise inspections from the Illinois Department of Agriculture and an inspection by the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation. The Illinois State Police (ISP) conducted a thorough investigation, interviewing staff members, volunteers, and the individuals that made criminal allegations. Investigators found no evidence to support the claims.

While the dozens of claims were found false and the facility passed all state inspections, including the investigation by ISP, we believed a complete analysis of animal control was still necessary to ensure public confidence. In January, Stratton - Reichert Law Firm, with many years of labor-management experience, was requested to review Animal Control's policies and procedures. After a 6-month evaluation and consultation with community veterinarians, the following recommendations are in effect to improve animal care and overall service.

As of today, Sangamon County Animal Control is under new leadership. Internal investigations and reviews revealed former Director Largent's deficiencies, including an inability to lead in a union work environment. Jeanne Keenan is named acting director of the facility. Jeanne spent several weeks at animal control, familiarizing herself with the facility and staff. Also, all staff members will review and sign new department policies and procedures. These packets are available for review by board members and the public. Animal intake, animal transfer, and adoption policies were enhanced to better our services. The changes reflect recommendations from our veterinarian advisors and research into best practices from comparable counties and the Animal Protective League (APL).

As the County continues to search for veterinarians to provide more service hours to the facility, a new employee was hired with a primary focus on animal care. Andrew Lehman accepted the position of Animal Care Manager. Andrew brings over 20 years of veterinarian clinic experience. In his role, Andrew will provide initial medical care in emergencies, perform routine examinations and procedures, and ensure proper vaccination of all animals within the facility. Along with the new position, I also put forward, for County Board approval, a \$50,000 Animal Emergency Care Fund to be used at the discretion of our veterinarian advisors for necessary procedures and surgeries. This fund will allow for the extension and betterment of life for many animals that desperately need care when arriving at the facility.

After months of recruitment during the ongoing national employee shortage, the animal control kennel is fully staffed, including the creation of an additional kennel attendant. In addition, an outsourced janitorial crew was brought in to provide regular cleaning and sanitation. As a result, more of the kennel attendants' time will be focused on animal care and enrichment.

A peer comparison study completed by MGT Consulting recommended steps to enhance community outreach and communication. Additional information will be available on the animal control website to meet these obligations, including inspection reports and animal intake, adoption, and euthanasia statistics. The County will conduct a further fee analysis of comparable counties and remains open to adjusting fees if justified. Animal control staff will increase community visibility and involvement. The study also recommended quarterly public meetings. In conjunction with the Public Health Oversight Committee, the director of Animal Control will now provide quarterly reports to the committee and community and be able to answer questions from board members. A veterinarian advisors board, consisting of local veterinarians, has been established to provide direction on animal control and review policies and procedures on an as-needed basis.

The final action announced will undoubtedly upset many in the community. Policy reviews and investigations have made it clear that animal control must temporarily suspend the volunteer program. This suspension includes volunteer dog walking. Countless violations of the volunteer agreement by individual volunteers and animal advocacy groups have put the public, staff, and animals in danger.

Under the current arrangement, volunteers are selected and trained by animal advocacy groups, not the County. Recent internal affair investigations revealed that some animal advocacy groups are unable or unwilling to enforce their own agreements and code of conduct. Volunteers were found in areas limited to staff and veterinarians, including restricted areas with dangerous animals not suitable for adoption, causing injuries and worker compensation claims against the County. Investigations also show a minority of volunteers, with no veterinarian experience, verbally harassed animal control staff, the public, and veterinarian advisors in an attempt to interfere with decisions. These actions are completely unacceptable.

The most severe infraction to date was an instance of serious threats of violence between two volunteers in the public adoption area. Upon further review, the County learned that one of the volunteers involved has a prior felony conviction for a violent assault and battery charge that resulted in a prison sentence, which is a direct violation of the code of conduct.

We are committed to reopening the volunteer program, but at this time, it's best for a short timeout. With the addition of an animal care manager and fully staffed animal care attendants, our staff will provide care and attention to the animals. This includes dog walking, which volunteers had previously handled.

Over the next ninety days, a new volunteer management structure modeled after comparable counties, including Macon County, will be implemented within the facility. I hope that volunteers and the public will understand the need for change after the dangerous acts documented in the reports. When the program restarts, volunteers will be approved and coordinated by animal control staff, and responsibilities will be limited to animal enrichment and adoptions.

The new policies and procedures in effect and the operational changes will enhance the service we provide at animal control. Community members should be assured that we do our best to deliver quality services and are always willing to review and adjust policies. We will continue to follow the advice and guidance from our community veterinarians to ensure the animal control facility provides the best service we can.

Thank you to the Board Members and Administration; without your patience and dedicated work, the actions to date would not have been possible. All new policy documents, reports, and inspections are available for your review.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact me with questions.