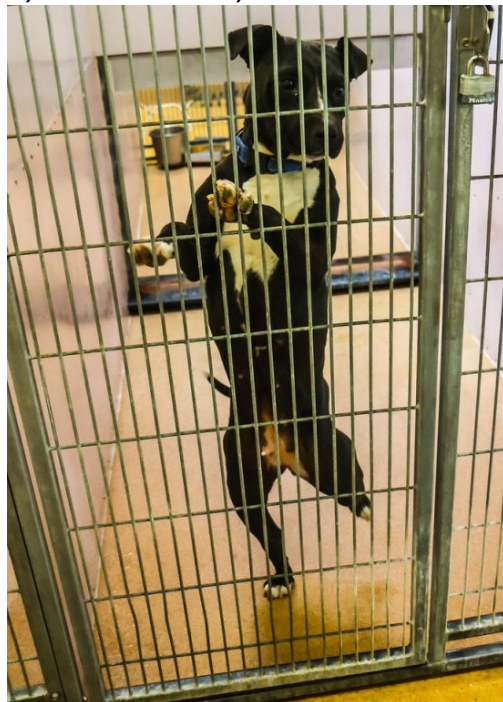


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## Director of Animal Services responds to request for information from Orinda Council

By Sora O'Doherty



This guy would be delighted to join a family.  
Photo Sora O'Doherty

Orinda, which contracts with the County to deal with stray and dead animals in the city, asked Contra Costa Animal Services (CCAS) to come before the City Council and provide an update on how things are going at the Martinez Shelter, after receiving emails critical of CCAS performance. On July 11, CCAS Director Beth Ward gave a presentation to the council, after which several members of the public offered differing opinions.

Ward explained to the Council that, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, pet adoptions were up and the number of animals coming into the shelter had declined. However, as the pandemic has waned, the number of animals coming into the shelter has increased. Despite the increase, numbers are still lower than they were in 2019, before the pandemic.

In 2022, Ward saw 82 animals taken in from Orinda, and 23 animals adopted by Orinda residents. Animal services also picks up dead animals. Of the animals taken in from Orinda, Ward noted that almost all would have been strays.

Ward stated that dog adoption rates remained very consistent throughout 2022, with 53% of dogs adopted by the end of the year. In 2022, CCAS's annual intake was 6,426 animals. The adoption, transfer, and return-to-owner outcomes totaled 4,072. Ward said that results in an average daily intake of 17 animals per day, and an average daily output of 11 animals per day.

Ward acknowledged that the shelter is overcrowded, but added that statewide, shelters in cities such as Los Angeles, Pleasanton, Oakland and San Jose are all facing critical overcrowding. Overcrowding coupled with a shortage of both staff and volunteers sometimes results in animals suffering mental and physical decline while in the shelter, and sometimes the decline is so significant that the animal is scheduled for euthanasia, Ward admitted.

Ward stated that when animals begin to suffer, they are placed on a list of animals that would benefit from adoption. If the animal is not adopted, it may then be placed on a list of animals that will be euthanized within 24 to 48 hours.

The chief matter of contention between the shelter and some animal activists concerns the number of animals that are killed by the shelter. Also of great concern is the lack of low-cost spay/neuter facilities to reduce the number of animals in the population.

Bara Sapir told the council that while there are currently seven animals being fostered out of CCAS, there are 100 fosters at Oakland Animal Services. In a year, Sapir said, Oakland has 497 fosters, while CCAS fosters were in single digits. She added that Contra Costa County has only one animal shelter, excluding a city shelter in Antioch, while Alameda County has seven shelters.

Ward later agreed that "Alameda County is a great comparison because it shows the lack of resources in our county." But she pointed out that most of the animal services in Alameda County are run by independent nonprofits, such as the East Bay SPCA, Independent Oakland Animal Services, the Berkeley Humane Society, and city-run shelters in the cities of Alameda, Berkeley, Hayward, Fremont, and San Leandro.

Sapir did give CCAS kudos for the new animal play groups which she thinks will be a game changer, but she lamented the lack of an animal behavioralist on staff. Ward denied that a behavioralist is necessary.

The CCAS shelter is housed in a 38,000 square foot facility and serves 18 of the 19 cities in the county, with Antioch running their own shelter. Ward noted that recent rate increases in renewed contracts with the cities is providing more money to expand services. The Martinez shelter is unusual in that it provides treatment for animals with severe, contagious diseases such as parvovirus and ringworm.

One allegation is that the CCAS does not provide extensions for dogs on the euthanasia list when outside rescue agencies need more time to collect the animals. Ward says that the shelter frequently provides extensions, and posited that there may be times when a third party is positioning itself between a rescue group and the shelter, which may lead to miscommunications. Ward said she has asked staff to start making a record of times CCAS has been asked for an extension and whether or not the request was granted.

Speaking to the city council, Irina Dyatlovskaya complained that dogs are not evaluated properly and that rescue groups do not have the access to the animals that they used to and described how a committed person from the public wanted to adopt a dog and was not allowed to do so directly from CCAS, and was told it was necessary to go through a rescue organization. Ward explained that while many dogs are in fact adopted directly from the shelter, some dogs are believed to have issues that need to be worked out by spending time in a rescue facility, and that safety concerns sometime do not allow an animal to be directly adopted.

Ward is anxious to speak with those who have concerns. She has invited Sapir and others to meet with her, and Steve Burdo, CCAS Public Information Officer, has been reaching out as well. "We want to do better," Ward says; "there's always room for improvement, but I need to talk to people and hear their concerns." However, Ward draws a line at what she terms "hate speech," such as calling CCAS a Nazi camp or comparing staff to Hitler.

Ward told the council that CCAS hired a group to come in and train staff on doggy play groups and CCAS is looking at a development grant program to support rescue groups. CCAS currently utilizes up to \$150,000 a year from the Animal Benefit Fund to provide grants to support nonprofit animal welfare groups to help Contra Costa County animals. Ward considers the nonprofit groups absolutely necessary for the shelter to succeed in placing animals in homes. CCAS is also soliciting proposals from qualified and experienced agencies to receive Animal Benefit Fund funding to increase low-cost spay and neuter opportunities in the county.

Ward concluded her remarks by explaining that CCAS's biggest gap in services now is low-cost and accessible spay and neuter services. "That sounds like its an easy fix, right? Just build a clinic and they will come," she said, but the reality is that there is a shortage in veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians across the state and across the nation. "I know a spay/neuter clinic that was built down by Bakersfield and they have not been able to staff it." She added that CCAS is working toward a proposal to use Measure X county funds to expand accessibility to low-cost spay and neuter services throughout the county.

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