

Grand Jury Report
Habersham County Department of Animal Care and Control
June 2017

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On Tuesday, June 13, 2017, members of the Habersham County Grand Jury toured the facilities housing the Habersham County Department of Animal Care and Control at John B. Gesbocker Animal Shelter, 4231 B Toccoa Highway, Clarkesville, Georgia. Director Madi Hawkins accompanied the jurors on a tour of the shelter. The following observations were noted.

Facility

Observations: The John B. Gesbocker Animal Shelter is housed in a building that was built in 1998. The building is divided into an entry, which includes small office space and an employee restroom. In addition, there is a small hallway, housing for animals and a wash area. The building has no central air and ventilation, but does have central heat.

The office consists of a counter/desk area that is used for the reception of visitors/animal drop-off, paperwork, work area for employees, and storage. It was noted during the visit that there was no privacy for employees to handle phone calls from citizens or to complete paperwork necessary for day-to-day functions (adoptions, animal drop-off, etc.). Three employees shared the workspace, which was designed for one person. The floor space was crowded with little room to maneuver. The employee bathroom also serves a dual purpose as restroom and storage. Beyond the office is a hallway leading to animal housing. This hallway functions as a make-do laundry room where a washing machine runs practically nonstop; detergent, bleach, and towels are stored here too. Because the building has no central ventilation or air conditioning, the dryer was recently moved to an outside building due to the heat caused during operation.

Housing for animals inside the building is divided into three parts. A small room is designated for cats and contains a sink area. All sanitizing of tools, dishes, and other items is completed in this area. The main inside section designated for dogs was overcrowded because it frequently houses two dogs in a single cage (with an inside and outside opening). A second inside section for dogs was dedicated for "new intakes" where dogs are housed until their temperament can be assessed. This section also houses dogs that may appear to have behavioral issues. The noise in this small space was deafening. In addition to these two dog spaces, an outside area contains open-air cages with doghouses for larger animals. These animals have overhead coverage, but the cages are open to the elements.

Recommendations: The shelter is overcrowded. The intake volume increases every year with 200 animals received for the month of June. The need for additional room for animals is apparent. The concern over disease and need for cleanliness is exacerbated by the cramped quarters and the lack of space for washing bedding, feeding tools, and general hygiene. There is simply not enough inside space to house the animals now. The question of euthanasia as a way to alleviate overcrowding was discussed.

According to Director Hawkins euthanasia rates have been dramatically decreased over the last few years. Rates fell from 85-90 percent to 5 percent due to various factors. The shelter staff strives to find suitable homes for the animals in their care. Partnerships with rescue groups has helped some animals to be transferred to no-kill shelters. Foster homes help ease the overcrowding in the shelter, providing additional time for animals to find a suitable home. Additionally, networking with community partnerships has helped to save animals' lives. Some of these are: Lee Arrendale Prison, Habersham Humane Society, and HELP to name just a few. Also, public awareness, social media, and education initiatives have helped publicize the

need for adoptions. The members of the Grand Jury who toured the facility support continuance of these partnerships and educational initiatives.

Aside from the overcrowding, the building is outdated and small. There is little dedicated storage space for animal supplies and food. Storage of food and supplies took up most of the employee restroom. Food was also stored in the hallway space and outside buildings. The need for a commercial washer and dryer housed inside the building was apparent. The addition of central air would also alleviate having to keep the back doors open for ventilation, which would reduce the flies and odor. Installing a separate drop-off bay would provide safety when animals are admitted to the shelter. This would be preferable when dropping off larger animals and animals who may pose a threat. This would also free up valuable space for employees.

Additional space for the employees is also a concern. A larger office space is recommended with separate work areas for greeting visitors, office supply storage, and handling the enforcement of animal ordinances and the accompanying paperwork. There are three phones, but they all answer to one number. Three computers are available, but are outdated. There should be an individual workspace for each employee with a different phone line and updated computer system to catalog and handle the volume of intake. The lack of privacy became apparent, as the Grand Jury was touring and a community member called complaining rudely about state laws concerning neglect of animals. In such a small space, any visitor is privy to phone conversations that are none of their concern. The openness of the visitor/office area would raise a concern over confidentiality.

Staff

Observations: The Animal Care and Control Department employs a full-time director, three full-time animal control employees, three part-time kennel technicians, and an administrative assistant. Animal control is available 24 hours a day, requiring at least one employee to be on call after normal working hours. There is no employed licensed veterinarian at the animal shelter, but many of the county's veterinarians volunteer time to check animals and make recommendations for treatment. The shelter director under the supervision of a local veterinarian generally completes euthanasia. In addition, volunteers assist in exercising dogs, cleaning of cages, feeding, and other tasks to meet the needs of over 200 animals sheltered presently.

Animal shelter employees are responsible for the day-to-day management of the animal shelter for a county with a population of 43,752 residents (2014).

Staff has numerous tasks including, but not limited to:

- training requirements
- stray animal pickup
- rabies enforcement
- cruelty to or neglect of animals enforcement
- leash law violations
- excessive animal noise complaints
- enforcement of state laws and county ordinances pertaining to animal control and management
- promote the health, safety, and welfare of all animals in Habersham County
- promote responsible pet ownership
- respond and assist police in animal bite cases
- maintain records as required by local and state agencies

As stated earlier, the office conditions are cramped and not conducive to productive work. The work area climate seemed "frantic" or "chaotic" during our visit. One "case" was hardly resolved before another "case" was presented. Visitors seemed to arrive one right after another while the telephone rang almost constantly. In the short time of our visit, we felt the frustration that most of the work load is due to irresponsible pet ownership. According to Director Hawkins, the attrition rate is high due to the emotional drain on employees.

Recommendations: Additional staff is needed to care for the animals in the shelter and to perform the various duties mentioned earlier. With the addition of more space and employees, staff will be better able to organize and specialize in duties. Specialization in specific duties is more efficient and provides continuity between government and the public. Training for employees in emergency certification would help even out duties equally because only two employees currently have that status. With only three full-time employees on call, current staff must work additional hours to handle emergencies.

Special commendation must be given to Director Madi Hawkins. She goes above and beyond in her job. She gives of her personal time and cares deeply about the animals. Director Hawkins and other shelter employees went above-and-beyond during our recent "puppy mill" crisis. The shelter was overwhelmed with phone calls, visitors, donations, questions, and volunteers. The Humane Society of the United States moved in and quickly set up the emergency shelter. However, shelter employees and/or volunteers continue to care for approximately 29 dogs that are in limbo until this case is resolved. It should be noted that county taxpayers are ultimately responsible for the financial upkeep of these dogs.

Community Involvement

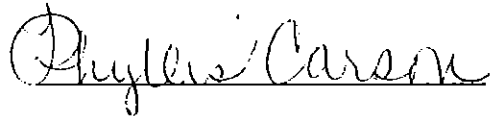
Observations: According to Director Hawkins, many volunteers, community agencies, and rescue groups assist in carrying out the duties of the Animal Care and Control Department. Volunteers help with day-to-day operations and duties like cleaning of cages and utensils. Animal advocacy groups provide funds and/or labor for shelter improvements. They also assist with funds for medical expenses. Rescue groups assist with finding suitable homes for adoptable animals. In addition, veterinarians from the county also provide assistance in the health care of the animals housed at the shelter. Individuals and retail companies provide many resources such as bedding and food. Without these valuable contributions from community partners, the shelter's budget would be inadequate to meet the minimal needs of the shelter's operation.

The department is responsible for the education of the public regarding state laws and county ordinances. This is handled personally in face-to-face encounters or through contact with the office; through information on the website; posts on social media; and through involvement with schools. A pilot program was initiated at Demorest Elementary to educate students on proper care of animals during the 2016-17 school year.

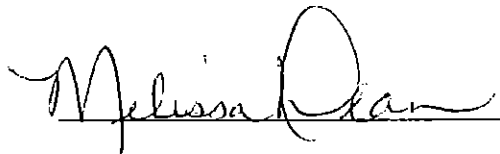
Recommendations: The Grand Jury was impressed with the level of assistance from the community and supports further community involvement. Director Hawkins has established healthy relationships with animal advocacy groups; these partnerships are invaluable for the animals that are housed at the shelter. Often animals are sent to rescue groups and/or foster homes. Having more employees would free Director Hawkins to pursue additional support and provide education to the community at large. There are many misconceptions about state laws and county ordinances. It is the responsibility of the department to clear up these misconceptions, but time and other duties often take priority.

Summary

The Grand Jury recommends the Habersham County Commissioners pursue other options for a building large enough to accommodate the large population of animals being served by the Department of Animal Care and Control. Separate office space with updated technology and an animal bay for community members to drop off animals is also recommended. Increasing the budget to accommodate additional personnel and needed training for all employees would bring this department into a place of prominence. With all the current publicity around the court case mentioned earlier, now would be an excellent time to move forward.



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