

## **A Shelter in Crisis**

### A Critical Assessment of “Animal Care Services Review: Phase One”

This document presents the response of animal advocacy group Stayin' Alive Long Beach to some of the major findings covered in “Animal Care Services Review: Phase One,” with attention to the City’s response to the audit’s findings.

Stayin' Alive Long Beach would like to thank City of Long Beach Auditor Laura Doud and her staff for completing this study of Long Beach Animal Care Services (LBACS).

The Auditor’s recently-released report, “Animal Care Services Review: Phase One,” makes many of the recommendations Stayin' Alive Long Beach (SALB) has made over the past four years, including those made in two comprehensive research reports and a model ordinance. In addition, however, the Auditor’s report reveals a shelter that is deeply flawed and suffering from mismanagement in the form of “inconsistent decision-making” and “conflicting shelter practices,” with changes implemented “without proper direction and explanation” (Review, Phase One; page 3).

Clearly, LBACS is a shelter in crisis. This comes as no surprise to those who have been monitoring LBACS for the past four years, yet knowing this makes the audit’s findings and the City’s response no less troubling. In particular, Long Beach taxpayers and the animal welfare community should be aware of the following points arising from the audit, all of which are detrimental to Long Beach’s shelter animals:

**1. The report recommendations give the City the ability to delay much-needed, easy-to-implement changes.** It is immediately clear that the report’s prioritization of recommendations into Short-term, Long-term and Best Practices has allowed the City, in its response to the audit, to defer many easily-accomplished lifesaving practices to an unspecified later date and to make adoption of those best practices contingent on LBACS’ evaluating and approving of them. If LBACS approved of these best practices, many of which management is already aware of, the practices would already be implemented. This effectively weakens the impact of the recommendations and will result in the continued unnecessary euthanasia of animals. This is especially true in the area of adoptions, where the report identifies a number of Best Practices and Long-term recommendations that could be accomplished relatively easily in the short term, at little cost, to save many lives.

**2. LBACS lacks control of basic shelter operations, animal care practices and veterinary protocols.** The Auditor’s report shows that LBACS has been unable to carry out even the most basic shelter operations, animal care practices and veterinary protocols to ensure humane treatment of animals. The report identified basic aspects of day-to-day shelter operations that most residents of Long Beach would be shocked to know aren’t being properly attended to. The report detailed inhumane practices at LBACS such as:

- Housing sick animals near unvaccinated animals,
- Leaving water dishes in kennels during cleaning so that disinfectant is introduced to dogs’ drinking water,
- Not implementing medical rounds to properly monitor the health of animals,
- Not monitoring animals after they have received medical treatment, and
- Not placing animals post-treatment in locations where they can be easily observed.

These, and many other problems revealed in the report, are major missteps in shelter operations management. Skillful management of the most basic of shelter operations is something that taxpayers and the public at large in Long Beach have a right to expect from their city shelter. The fact that LBACS has been operating in such a haphazard and chaotic fashion should be deeply troubling to Long Beach residents.

**3. LBACS’ poor performance is blamed on lack of resources, when deficiencies in basic shelter operations point to management problems.** LBACS has long claimed a lack of resources as an excuse for its poor performance, whereas the audit clearly reveals management’s inability to competently manage the shelter by identifying numerous deficits in the most basic of shelter operations. One of the most troubling findings in the Auditor’s report, however, is that the shelter consultants hired by the City to assess LBACS, JVR Shelter Strategies, agree that LBACS is attempting to operate beyond what its current resources allow and recommends decreasing length of stay by a variety of means, including euthanasia.<sup>1</sup> This finding has been used by the City to essentially place the blame for operational deficiencies on a lack of resources, rather than on managerial inefficiency. The management issue is clearly outlined in the report. The fact that it is unrelated to resources is explicitly articulated:

“However, [operating beyond organizational capacity] does not mean that additional resources are the solution to all of ACS’ challenges. Many recommendations in this report address the more immediate needs to standardize shelter procedures and practices, incorporate industry standards and best practices, and ensure accountability and management controls. *ACS has very limited standard operating procedures, which have resulted in inconsistent decision-making and conflicting shelter practices, as well in changes being implemented without proper direction and explanation*” (emphasis added) (Review, Phase One; pages 2-3).

Operational duties are the responsibility of management. The shortcomings the audit has identified in the management of LBACS can be directly traced to the City’s longstanding practice of hiring of managers from inside Long Beach city administration who come to the

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<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that the consultants hired by the Auditor to assess LBACS, JVR Shelter Strategies, would make a recommendation that will result in more unnecessary euthanasia. Their website indicates that they are not aligned with the concept of no kill sheltering, for example, listing consultation on "euthanasia practices" as a service they offer, but nothing about adoption programs, foster programs or other lifesaving programs that shelters – especially Long Beach Animal Care Services – need to have. This means that they have limited ability to advocate for no kill sheltering’s potential to better utilize and allocate the shelter’s current resources.

position with no experience or education in animal sheltering. This is a significant problem that the City has made no move to acknowledge or remedy.

Tying improvements to a need for more resources, rather than to inefficiencies and deficits of management effectively gives the City the green light to both increase euthanasias and continue to offload animals onto overworked, under-resourced rescues. This message has been received loud and clear by Director of Parks, Recreation and Marine, Marie Knight, who, in her response to the report, blames a lack of resources and increased demands from the community (who the shelter is responsible to serve) for the shelter’s poor performance. As a result, we can expect LBACS to place increased pressures on rescue organizations and, even worse, carry out more unnecessary euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals in the years to come unless concerned citizens place substantial pressure on the City to maximize efficiency by hiring qualified management at LBACS.

**4. The City’s troubled relationship with SpcaLA will remain in place.** The report recommends clarification of the roles of LBACS and spcaLA. These two entities have been in a toxic relationship since they entered into a lease agreement in 1998. Although the City has said that it agrees that improved clarity is needed, there is no stated commitment to the report’s recommendation to have LBACS place animals into homes when to do so is more efficient than waiting for spcaLA to transfer the animal to its shelter. This recommendation points to a practice that LBACS leadership has acknowledged to many in the animal welfare community in the past: that the City allows spcaLA to “cherry-pick” the most adoptable animals from the LBACS shelter. This leaves those animals who have the greatest need to languish in a disorganized and poorly-run shelter without the safety net provided by an adoption and foster program. Given the vagueness of the City’s response, we expect that City Manager Patrick West and Ms. Knight will continue to allow spcaLA to have undue influence over LBACS. This means that a private organization will continue to have some degree of control over how LBACS funds are allocated, without being accountable to the taxpaying public. Furthermore, if the City continues to defer to spcaLA, LBACS’ slow progress in adoptions will continue to result in more unnecessary deaths of shelter animals.

**5. The City’s response to easily-achievable changes in adoption programming shows a continued lack of interest in a much-needed adoption program.** While the report outlines several short-term, industry-approved recommendations in the area of adoptions, including ceasing dog-to-dog meetings and landlord checks – the City’s response is to make their implementation of these short-term recommendations contingent on LBACS’ review of the practices. This will likely result in continued unnecessary euthanasias in the short-term, extending into the future. Furthermore, the City does not address very easy-to-implement best practices recommended in the report, such as extending adoption hours to 7 pm at least one evening per week and implementing public-friendly adoption policies that are already in use in many of the most high-performing and humane shelters. It is likely that these easy-to-implement, lifesaving changes will, at the very least, be delayed, resulting in unnecessary euthanasia of animals.

While the City does say that there will be an increase in offsite adoption opportunities, we expect that this will not result in an increase in adoptions unless LBACS implements public-friendly adoption policies, as recommended in the report, that facilitate moving animals into good homes by taking an education-based approach to adoptions, rather than the heavy-handed “requirements” approach that currently characterizes LBACS’ practice.

The City’s lack of commitment to a full adoption program operated by LBACS has resulted in the deaths of over 40,000 animals since Mr. West assumed his position with the City. The City’s response reveals an administration still unwilling to implement a full adoption program, in spite of receiving industry-approved recommendations for easy changes to be put in place. This harmful stance has the potential to be mitigated by direction from the City’s elected officials; however, Mayor Garcia and the current City Council have thus far shown themselves to be unwilling to take the necessary steps to bring much-needed improvements to LBACS.

**6. The City’s continues to avoid commitment to a foster program.** Echoing recommendations made by Stayin’ Alive since 2013, the Auditor’s report makes a recommendation for a foster program; however, as it has done with many of the recommendations made in the report, the City has given this suggestion low priority status pending the identification of funds to support such a program. This stance disregards the fact that other animal shelters, such as Sacramento’s Front Street Animal Shelter, have robust foster programs without having substantially larger budgets than LBACS. Given the City’s pointed avoidance of a commitment to a lifesaving foster program, it appears unlikely that a much-needed foster program will be put in place in a reasonable period without substantial pressure from community stakeholders.

**7. The City will delay implementation of a strategic planning process.** Finally, the recommendation that the City engage in a strategic planning process for LBACS is a good one; however, as it did with many of the other recommendations contained in the report, the City has agreed in principle with the recommendation while simultaneously delaying any real, meaningful action to an undefined future date. While changes do take time to be developed and put in place, LBACS, as a shelter in crisis, needs changes sooner rather than later. Without the City’s willingness to prioritize this recommendation, it could be two or more years before a strategic plan is put in place, and even then, a strategic plan is of little use without competent and knowledgeable management to implement it.

It is clear that the City has no intention to prioritize lifesaving or join cities like Austin and Sacramento in creating progressive shelters that serve their communities. Community stakeholders will need to continue to pressure the City to make the changes Long Beach deserves. This is a shame for Long Beach, and even worse, a tragedy for our shelter animals.