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Chair's Review of Multnomah County Animal Services

Executive Summary

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Background

On Chair Vega Pederson's first working day, she was confronted by an unprecedented crisis at Multnomah County Animal Services (MCAS). Being informed that the shelter was severely overcrowded, the Chair determined that drastic steps needed to be taken in order to stabilize operations in both the immediate and longer-term.

This crisis was exacerbated by the shelter's closure to in-person adoptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the pandemic's impact on best practices and resource allocation decisions while the shelter wasn't hosting in-person adoptions. It also came after audits and calls for operational changes were not fully implemented. Previous recommendations included the need for additional staffing, adequate care and enrichment for animals in custody, more consistent management of volunteers and relationships with partner agencies and many other challenges raised by auditors, external consultants, shelter staff and volunteers over the course of several years.

To address this crisis, Chair Vega Pederson authorized the shelter to pause new intakes of stray animals for one week in order to train staff and prepare the facility to reopen for the first time in nearly three years, and deployed County emergency management personnel to support the shelter team. Within one week, our shelter was able to reopen and begin to find homes for many of the animals in our care due to the hard work of MCAS' staff and a tremendous amount of support from community volunteers who responded to an urgent call for help. In January, MCAS successfully adopted out 108 animals and transferred 138 to partner organizations thanks to the efforts of our staff alongside volunteers who cumulatively contributed more than 600 volunteer hours during the month.

From the beginning, the Chair has been committed to ensure this work has been done in a way that recognizes and addresses the inequities faced by communities in Multnomah County and staff have utilized the County's Equity and Empowerment lens to apply an equity analysis to this work and this process overall. We also recognize that this is part of an overall trend in animal welfare work, which pertains most specifically to how the community is considered and engaged-with as thought partners, stakeholders and volunteers.

But the crisis, along with subsequent media coverage, highlighted the magnitude of challenges that the animal shelter faced, and the need for drastic action to begin to reform the shelter, improve outcomes for the animals in our care, and strengthen operations to support MCAS staff and volunteers. To that end, Chair Vega Pederson directed her staff to commence a multi-phased review of operations and policies, while charging the shelter with immediate and ongoing action to address the longstanding gap between ideal services and the reality.

Process and findings of Chair's Review

In February, MCAS, the Department of Community Services (DCS) Director's Office, and the Chair's Office initiated the review ordered by Chair Vega Pederson. The review consisted of three phases: an initial accounting of the status of recommendations made to MCAS between 2016 - 2023, alongside a contemporary environmental scan by the shelter's Operations Manager and the development of a staffing model ahead of the fiscal year 2024 budget process (Phase 1); robust community engagement to solicit feedback from a wide range of community members, partner organizations, and current and former shelter staff, volunteers, and foster households (Phase 2); and the development of a strategic work plan outlining how all outstanding recommendations not already integrated into shelter operations will be implemented over time (Phase 3).

Recognizing that multiple partners – including the Multnomah County Auditor, the nonprofit organization Dogs Playing for Life and the University of Wisconsin Shelter Medicine Program – have provided numerous recommendations over previous years, Phase 1 of the review focused on assessing the status of those recommendations and identifying where Animal Services had failed to fully implement recommendations or had seen backsliding on progress towards implementation.

The first phase of the review also included MCAS' new Operations Manager's work to conduct a contemporary environmental scan, the findings of which were incorporated into both the Phase 1 report and the final strategic plan. Finally, during Phase 1 of this review, MCAS leadership was tasked with preparing a summary of budgetary recommendations to ensure that staffing levels meet National Animal Care & Control Association guidelines.

Phase 1 of the review found that of the 66 recommendations from the 2016 audit, 2018 audit follow up, and 2018 Dogs Playing for Life consultation, only six were fully completed or implemented. Additionally, it was found that limited progress was made toward developing a stronger organizational culture as directed by the Collaborative Improvement Working Group review that took place in 2020 and implementing the guidance provided by the University of Wisconsin Shelter Medicine program, but that much of that progress was stalled or reversed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The contemporary environmental scan conducted during Phase 1 affirmed many of the issues that had been highlighted elsewhere, and found that MCAS has been operating in a perpetual "state of transition" since operational changes were made during the COVID-19 pandemic and due to high levels of employee attrition, which led to profound disparities between official organizational policies, philosophies and expectations, and the shelter's current abilities, resources and realities. From that scan, it was recommended that MCAS leadership focus on creating, reviewing and revising critical policies and procedures and realigning the purpose of each work unit with a central mission statement. That work continued throughout the subsequent phases of this review.

Finally, as part of Phase 1, MCAS' leadership engaged in a review of adequate staffing levels – with a focus on animal care – and determined a recommended staffing level of 15.6 - 25.9 FTE per day in the Animal Care Tech 1 & 2 positions was necessary to meet National Animal Care & Control Association guidelines.

Drawing on this analysis, MCAS's submitted Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) budget requested:

- Six additional Animal Care Techs, including three Animal Care Tech 1s (ACT1) and three Animal Care Tech 2s (ACT2s);
- Two additional Client Services Office Assistant Senior (OA Senior) positions; and
- One additional Field Services Dispatcher position.

When incorporating the contributions of MCAS' volunteers, these additional positions bring Animal Care staffing levels up to industry guideline standards, which has long been a high-priority for providing the enrichment animals in Multnomah County's care need and deserve.

Subsequently, Chair Vega Pederson increased the original request by one and included seven additional Animal Care Tech positions, alongside the Client Services and Dispatcher positions, in her Chair's Proposed Budget. Those positions were included in the final adopted FY24 budget approved by the Board.

Following the successful conclusion of Phase 1 to collect all previous recommendations and begin environmental adjustments, MCAS partnered with an outside agency, Lara Media Services, to conduct robust community engagement and receive feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders and community members. Lara Media engaged animal welfare partner organizations, long-term shelter volunteers and foster households, previous adopters from MCAS, and other members of the community over three weeks in mid June and early July; they conducted three small group conversations with a total of 27 participants, 20 individual interviews, and sponsored an online survey that was completed by 305 individuals. Participants were compensated for their time participating in this project.

Through this engagement, the review found support and admiration for the hardworking and caring staff at Animal Services, the pool of volunteers who provide critical support to the shelter, the services provided to animals besides cats and dogs, and the foster program. However, it was also found that there are many areas where MCAS needs to improve, including:

- Animal care and enrichment,
- Facilities improvements,
- Communications,
- Practices relating to the spay & neuter program and veterinary services, and
- Recruitment and training of volunteers and staff.

Together, these first two phases provided important insights into MCAS' operations and highlighted the areas where leadership must focus their efforts and resources to make meaningful improvements as quickly as possible.

Improvements made during the Chair's Review

When initiating this review, Chair Vega Pederson made clear to MCAS' leadership that she expected significant progress toward implementation of these recommendations and improvements at the shelter while the review was underway.

In June, MCAS provided to the Board an update on progress made in the first half of 2023. Tasks completed at that point included but were not limited to:

- Significant changes to feeding, cleaning, pathway planning procedures;
- Reforms to Field Services' practices when communicating to the public about protective custody cases and conducting investigations;
- Expanding contracts with community veterinarians to provide spay/neuters and vaccinations to adopted pets; and
- The establishment of an intranet site where staff can easily access resources and materials.

Tasks in progress at that time included but were not limited to:

- Updates to procedures around transfer, foster and volunteer programs;
- New training for staff to expand dog-to-dog meets, increase skills in assessing dog behavior, and reintroduce playgroups;
- Providing auditory enrichment to animals; and
- Implementing new specialized scheduling and volunteer management technologies.

Additionally, a top priority for MCAS' leadership over the summer has been to successfully recruit and onboard the ten new staff positions the Board allocated in the FY24 budget, alongside vacant positions.

As of early September, the status of those recruitments was:

- All three new ACT2 positions are filled, along with several other positions that were vacant at the time of interviews, with the only vacancy in the ACT 2 classification being one limited duration position for hospital support functions;
- All four new ACT1 positions, as well as four additional vacancies, have been offered and are at the reference check stage;
- Interviews have been scheduled for the two new OA Senior positions as well as two vacant existing positions in early September; and recruitment for the Field Services

Dispatcher opened in late August and will be used to fill the new position as well as an existing vacancy.

Phase 3: Strategic Work Plan

The third phase of the Chair's review of Animal Services focused on the development of a strategic work plan describing how MCAS will complete the implementation of the recommendations and priorities identified through this review over the course of the next several months.

In the following sections, you will find the Strategic Work Plan, which outlines the projects that will encompass this work while we continue to establish a culture that embraces ongoing process improvement at MCAS. Within the plan, each recommendation identified in the first two phases of this review has been updated to reflect its latest status, and added to a "project" if appropriate given its status. Projects may consist of multiple recommendations. Recommendations that are duplicative or which may no longer be relevant and which will not be included in the projects identified in this work plan are identified therein along with explanations for the reasoning why they were consolidated or will not be advanced.

Projects in this work plan are divided into six "groups". These six groups reflect the highest priorities for the Chair, DCS Director and MCAS leadership. Recognizing that there is a great deal of intersectionality between many of the projects crossing across multiple groups, MCAS has prioritized these groups to the greatest extent possible.

The six groups that encompass the projects of this work plan, ranked in priority order are:

1. Safety and wellbeing of pets in our care;
2. Policy and procedure standardization and accountability;
3. Volunteer management, hiring and onboarding, and rightsizing staffing levels with identifiable methodology;
4. Culture change, change management and transparency;
5. Facilities and plant improvements and plans; and
6. Data integrity and quality analysis.

As this work advances, the ongoing process improvement envisioned will be carried out using a bottom-up approach, with the ideas, needs and contributions of MCAS' staff and volunteers informing this work as it moves forward. The process of addressing the past recommendations will allow the shelter to develop an ongoing quality improvement framework with the goal of preventing a future crisis of this nature. Most of these projects will be completed by teams working to advance multiple projects at the same time, and therefore expectations around necessary timeframes and resources will iterate as this work moves forward.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Multnomah County Animal Services have been years in the making, and will require additional time, focused attention, and resources to rectify. Addressing these issues is a top priority for Chair Vega Pederson, and her office will remain closely engaged with DCS and MCAS leadership over the coming months as this work plan is implemented and continued improvements are made. As we strive to improve outcomes at MCAS, staff and management at all levels of the organization will utilize tools such as the County's Equity and Empowerment lens to ensure that our efforts are informed by an analysis that takes into account the impacts of historic and ongoing bias and inequities.

As this work takes place, Animal Services will work to improve transparency with both the Board of County Commissioners and the general public. Animal Services intends to present this work plan to the Board in a public briefing on Tuesday, September 26th, and will subsequently provide quarterly written reports to the Board with updates on the status of implementing recommendations and completing projects related to this review.

Further, in order to provide additional opportunities for community feedback and oversight, MCAS has committed to reconvening the Division's Community Advisory Committee, which has not convened since October 2022, by the Spring of 2024.

As we wrap up this opportunity to do an overdue, close and thorough review of Animal Services' operations and policies, our primary concerns and considerations have always been and continue to be the animals in our care. Our work to serve every animal in need, the people who love them and the many thoughtful animal advocates in Multnomah County – who we are lucky to know and have the opportunity to work closely with – will continue to be the north star towards which we point our implementation of continual process improvement. Providing safety, health and wellbeing to Multnomah County's animals is the joy of this work and will continue to guide us forward.