

2024-25 YOLO COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

Yolo County Animal Services: A Review of the Volunteer and Safety Programs



*“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”
-Mahatma Gandhi*

SUMMARY

The initial purpose for the 2024-25 Yolo County Grand Jury’s investigation into the Yolo County Animal Services (YCAS) animal shelter was to address any items that needed improvement. What the Grand Jury found to be of immediate importance was the long-term viability of the volunteer program at YCAS, which has a direct and significant impact on the welfare of the animals housed at the shelter, specifically the canines. The Grand Jury investigated the volunteer program and found the current volunteer sign-up process is hard to understand, is not user friendly, and does not have a good follow-up process. Poor volunteer recruitment procedures may stop people who want to help from getting involved, and the problem will adversely affect the care of the animals. Some members of the Grand Jury tried to apply online

to volunteer at the shelter, and they quickly found out firsthand how difficult the process is. The Grand Jury is concerned that there are inadequate recruiting policies that adversely affect volunteerism at the shelter.

Additionally, there are concerns about the lack of safety programs at the shelter for staff, volunteers, and the animals. The investigation focused mainly on the need for more volunteers and the implementation of a safety program. To address these concerns, the Grand Jury toured the facility and conducted several interviews with people inside and outside of the shelter. Grand Jurors also attended the April 16, 2025, Yolo Animal Services Planning Agency¹ meeting.

The Grand Jury finds that YCAS does not have enough volunteers to keep up with the general care of the canines, and management is failing to provide an easy application process to become a volunteer at the shelter. The number of volunteers at the shelter is well below what is needed to support the animals. In the first quarter of 2025, the number of gross intakes of dogs was reported to be 522 (Appendix A). Furthermore, there were only 10 foster placements of dogs during this time. There are several support groups in the area that will foster animals from the shelter, and it doesn't appear that YCAS is utilizing these outside foster groups to the extent that they can. On several occasions, the Grand Jury asked for a head count of the staff and volunteers and were told a report would be forthcoming. The information has not been received by the Grand Jury at the time of this report. Part of our concern is that members of the Grand Jury were informed of multiple times that people were turned away from either volunteering or fostering without someone from the shelter taking their names and contact information for volunteer opportunities.

¹ The Yolo Animal Services Planning Agency is a joint powers agency (JPA) formed by the County of Yolo and the Cities of Davis, Winters, and Woodland to study the operational and program options for animal services in Yolo County.

BACKGROUND

There is no real cost for shelter volunteers, and the current volunteer recruitment program at YCAS has been unsuccessful at recruiting sufficient volunteers. By participating in the volunteer program, community members contribute significantly to the welfare of animals, helping to provide them with care, comfort, and the opportunity for a better life. Volunteers are needed for many tasks in caring for the animals. Dog walking is known to help reduce kennel stress which can lead to aggressiveness, destructive behavior, and urinating and defecating in the kennel. With the increase in intakes at the shelter, more volunteers are needed. The current volunteers are tasked with duties beyond their scope and capacity that paid staff members would normally handle. This takes away time they could be helping to care for the animals. The primary focus of leadership at the shelter has been its connections with non-profits and outside sources for funding. This has helped to improve the shelter structurally and to expand its veterinary services, but it does not focus on the day-to-day care of the animals, especially the canines. While YCAS says it offers many volunteer opportunities, the process to sign up is confusing and not user-friendly. This can stop people from finishing the application process or prevent them from getting started altogether.

With respect to safety standards at animal shelters, a veterinary expert with Robson Forensic advocates that, "It is the standard of care that animal shelters adequately train the staff and volunteers to provide proper animal care to help ensure human and animal safety." [1] Time and resources should be provided to complete the training and once completed, the volunteers should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury's method of investigation of YCAS included the following:

- Tour of the Yolo County Animal Shelter at 140 Tony Diaz Drive, Woodland, CA by Grand Jury members.
- Conducted a series of exploratory interviews with those who served the Yolo County

Animal Shelter as volunteers and those who were contemporaries in partnering with the shelter.

- Review of the 2023-24 Grand Jury report on Yolo County Animal Services. [2]
- Reading a variety of publications and reviewing documentation from other local animal shelters and other online resources.
- Attending the April 16, 2025, Yolo Animal Services Planning Agency/JPA meeting.

DISCUSSION

The Tour

The Grand Jury toured the Yolo County Animal Shelter on several occasions during the current term of office, and they made the following observations:

- Dogs were unattended in the "meet and greet" yard.
- Dog water bowls were empty.
- The front and side yards were taken away from the dogs due to the pandemic and were never reopened to let the dogs out of their kennels for play time.
- There is no shading in the viewing area for dogs or visitors, although this is on the shelter's list and is being planned.
- The front door was locked, and the public was made to wait to be let into the building.
- In the front office area, there were no volunteer pamphlets in the holder on the wall.
- When Grand Jurors asked about volunteering in the front office, they were directed to go online to fill out the application.
- Further inspection of the shelter revealed dirty laundry and dirty dishes that had backed up.
- No supervisor was on duty on Saturdays. Staffing was scarce and hard to find for assistance with adoptions and/or questions from the public.

- Groups of people outside were unattended to and some ended up frustrated and leaving the shelter.

The Volunteer Application Process

The Grand Jury attempted to apply for a volunteer position at the shelter and experienced that the application process was difficult from the start as it was hard to find where to sign-up on the website. Although it listed available volunteer needs, the calendar showed no actual opportunities. After submitting the application, which included a background check requirement, it took over three months to receive a reply. The orientation for cat volunteering was rescheduled three times without any notice. More than a month later, the Grand Juror received a text from another volunteer (not a staff member) with an invitation to show up on a Sunday to learn about working with dogs. There was no mention of a formal orientation, and when we contacted the shelter for clarification, the Grand Juror was referred once again to the website. Two Facebook messages and two emails were then sent to the volunteer coordinator, but the Grand Juror did not receive a response. Furthermore, it was discovered that many volunteer applications were ignored or not responded to, and various inquiries about fostering animals have not been answered.

Safety and Training

Safety is a concern at the shelter. Animal shelter volunteers are at risk of being bitten by dogs. It is widely known that dogs experience “kennel stress” when housed at animal shelters. Kennel stress can manifest in various ways including aggression, fear, anxiety, shaking, whining, or other changes in behavior. Certain stressors like overcrowding, insufficient food, excessive noise, and negative or threatening behavior from other dogs, can put the volunteers and the public at risk. The dogs may be docile for a time, but dog attacks on people at animal shelters have increased in the last several years. Given the potential for increased stress on the animals, volunteers need to be trained to detect signs of stress and fearful behavior before they spend time with the dogs or expose the animals to the public.

FINDINGS

F1 Yolo County Animal Service's volunteer sign-up process is confusing and not helpful.

- The sign-up link is hard to find on the website.
- The form is labeled "Application Form – Yolo County Animal Services," but does not mention much about what the volunteering opportunities entail. The form lists the potential tasks a volunteer could do, but the information buttons have little information. It mentions a "Personal History Statement" and a background check, which might cause lack of interest to follow through with the application, or may be confusing to applicants.
- The YCAS website states there are "multiple volunteer opportunities," but they are not displayed on the YCAS calendar.
- Once the form is submitted, there is rarely a confirmation email sent to the applicant and inadequate follow-up on the application.
- Volunteer projects are not listed on the website such as doing laundry, washing dishes, or helping at adoption events.
- Emails and phone calls to the shelter were not answered or returned.
- A Facebook message was sent to YCAS (after no contact from the shelter), which also received no response.

F2 A robust model for a volunteer program can be found at Front Street Animal Shelter in Sacramento County (See Appendix B). Some elements of their program are comprised of the following:

- The website has a clearly labeled volunteer page with easy instructions.
- People can sign up using an online volunteer system that lets them pick jobs, get training, and track hours.
- Orientation classes are required and occur often, so people don't have to wait long.
- There are many jobs to choose from. For instance, walking dogs, helping with cats,

laundry, paperwork, and more.

- Teens aged 12–15 can volunteer with an adult, and teens 16+ can help on their own.
- The shelter stays in touch with volunteers and explains everything clearly.
- Volunteers get a handbook that talks about safety, teamwork, and respect.
- It's easy to contact the volunteer coordinator if there are questions.

F3 At Yolo County Animal Services, there are no training manuals, nor do the volunteers receive any type of safety training. There is lack of a process to inform the volunteers about the aggressive behaviors of the dogs or their medical conditions. This is essential for the safety of the volunteers, potential fosters, and adoption families. The Grand Jury found a safety program currently in use at Front Street Animal Shelter in the City of Sacramento. They have an official Volunteer Handbook that includes safety expectations and guidelines. (See Appendix C).

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1 Yolo County Animal Services should immediately fix the volunteer sign-up process to make it easier, more welcoming, and to recruit more help for the shelter. It is further advised that someone at the shelter should be in charge (supervisor or manager) that can work with the online systems for better organization and scheduling for the volunteers.

The Grand Jury recommends that Yolo County Animal Services:

- Make a clear and easy-to-find “Volunteer” section on their website.
- Change the online form to request information about volunteering and remove ambiguous or unclear language.
- Make sure all volunteer jobs listed on the website are also shown in the sign-up process and calendar.
- Send confirmation emails immediately when people sign up and follow up if needed,

and/or setup an automation process to respond to applicants. Include some orientations after work hours and on Saturdays or Sundays to accommodate working people who want to volunteer.

- Offer orientation sessions more often so people don't have to wait months.
- Reply to emails, phone calls, and social media messages quickly.
- Check and update the website regularly to make sure it's correct.
- Welcome feedback from staff and volunteers about the problems they face day-to-day.

R2 Yolo County Animal Services should adopt a formal volunteer program. We compared the current program to the volunteer program at Sacramento County's Front Street Animal Shelter, which is simple, organized, and welcoming (See Appendix B).

To make their program better, Yolo County Animal Services should consider tailoring their recruitment program in the following ways:

- Use an online system to manage sign-ups, schedules, and training.
- Hold orientation sessions more often and clearly explain the steps to start volunteering.
- List all volunteer jobs and make it easy to see what's available.
- YCAS has a few high school students helping at the shelter, but the volunteer program should be expanded for a greater opportunity for students and the shelter.
- Write a volunteer handbook and make sure someone is available to answer volunteer questions.

R3 The Grand Jury recommends that Yolo County Animal Services adopt a set of safety standards for the volunteers that should include the following:

- A safety manual designed for shelter animal handlers which includes volunteers and staff members.
- A training program should be required before volunteers begin working at the shelter.
- Animals that are stressed or displaying aggressive behavior should be labeled so volunteers are aware of any potential dangers before handling the animal or showing them to the public.

- Training on how to identify signs of aggression- fear, anxiety, and stress.
- Training on how to properly restrain a dog.
- Training on how to safely use restraining devices such as leashes, harness, and muzzles.
- Volunteers and the public should be notified of any animal being drugged for anxiety, even if a small amount, and every time they take the animal out of the kennel.
- Training on how to safely maneuver dogs inside and outside of the facility.
- Maintain current statistics related to safety and accidents.

COMMENDATION

There have been some structural updates to the shelter buildings such as a new HVAC system, and the addition of veterinary services superior to what was there before. Spay and neuters are done timely, and adoption parents do not need to return to the shelter for these services. The shelter was selected to participate in a “Clinic in a Can” program and \$337,000 of grant funding has been approved to pilot this program for low cost spay and neuter services. The program will include a surgery suite, recovery pad, wet table, exhaust fan, and electrical repairs.

The Grand Jury understands that the shelter is overwhelmed and understaffed, and we are thankful to all who contribute to the well-being of the animals at the shelter.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

- Yolo County Board of Supervisors as to F1, F2, F3 and R1, R2, R3

INVITED RESPONSES

- Director of Yolo County Animal Services as to F1, F2, F3 and R1, R2, R3
- Yolo County Animal Services Department Volunteer Coordinator as to F1, F2, F3 and R1, R2, R3
- Yolo County Animal Services Supervising Animal Services Officer as to F1, F2, F3 and R1, R2, R3

ACRONYMS/GLOSSARY OF TERMS

YCAS – Yolo County Animal Services

JPA – Joint Powers Authority

END NOTES

[1] <https://www.robsonforensic.com/articles/dog-bite-expert-witness-veterinarian>

[2] www.yolocounty.gov/living/grand-jury/yolo-county-grand-jury-reports

<https://www.yolocounty.gov/government/general-government-departments/community-services/animal-services/animal-services-stats>

<https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/community-development/animal-care/volunteer>

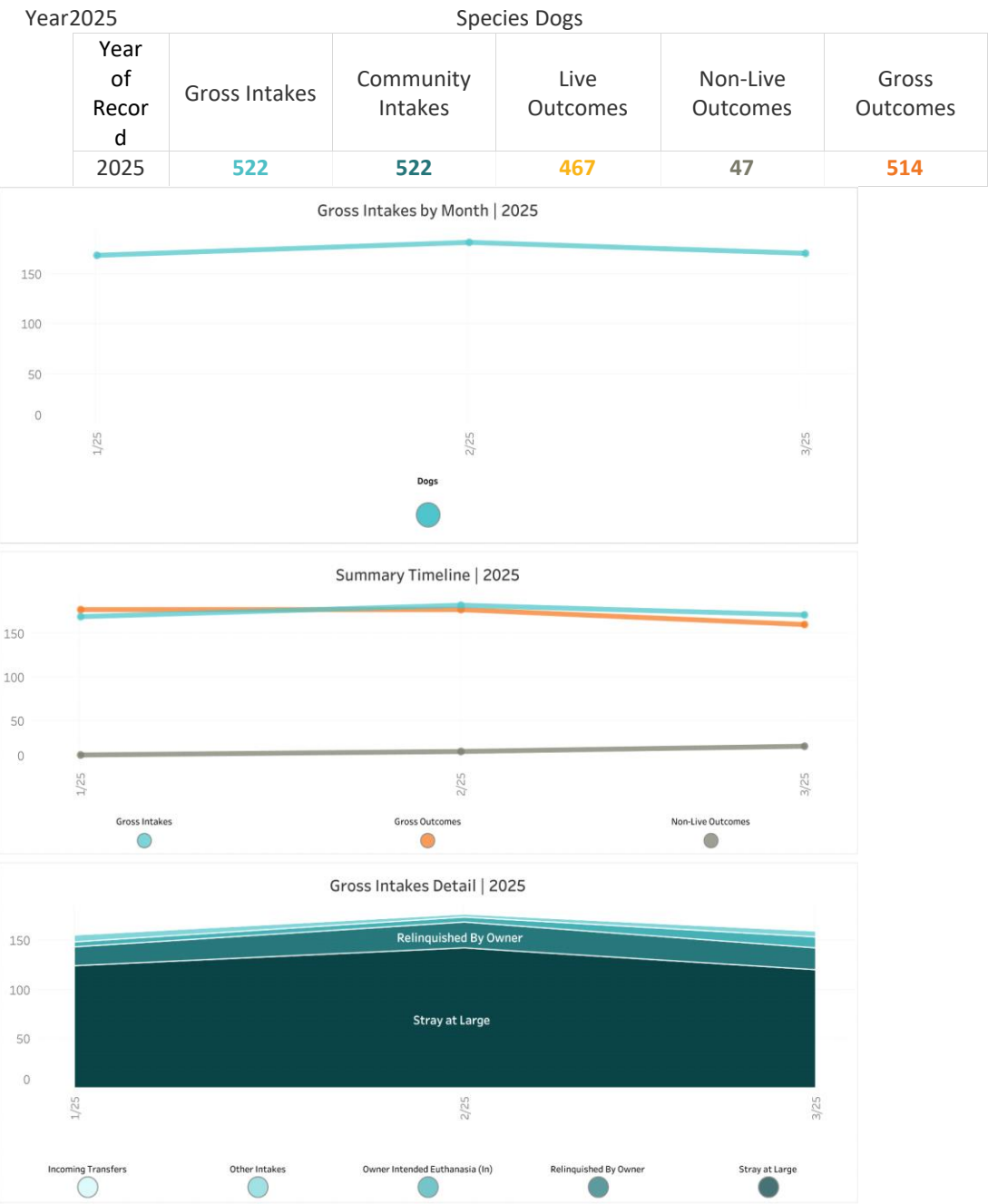
https://cdn.ymaws.com/calanimals.site-ym.com/resource/collection/111878EA-0CBE-4C5E-A44E-1E5508A4EA66/Volunteer_Handbook_2019.pdf

<https://www.dailydemocrat.com/2024/09/12/yolo-county-supervisors-approve-337000-for-clinic-in-a-can-for-pets/>

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provide information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPENDIX A

YOLO COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES



APPENDIX B



Online Volunteer System

The Front Street Animal Shelter uses the MyVolunteerPage program. **As an FSAS volunteer, you are expected to use the scheduling, training, and hours log appropriately.**

To register as a volunteer:

- Go to our website www.frontstreetsshelter.org HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/"g HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/"
- Click on the Volunteer tab on the right
- Click on Become A Volunteer
- Click on Fill Out An Application
- Create a user name & password
- Complete your volunteer profile

To access the volunteer system:

- Go to our website www.frontstreetsshelter.org HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/"g HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/" HYPERLINK "http://www.frontstreetsshelter.org/"
- Click on the Volunteer tab on the right
- Click on "Registered Volunteers Sign In Here"
- Click on Log In to Your Account and use the username and password you created when you completed your online application. If you forget your username or password, please email me at jwagaman@cityofsacramento.org and I will send you the information. DO NOT create an additional profile!

To sign up for shifts/training opportunities:

- ☐ Log in to your volunteer profile
- Click on the Opportunities tab
- Click on the activity or training opportunity you are interested in ☐ Check the box next to the date you would like to attend ☐ Click Sign Up!
- Only opportunities that you are qualified to participate in will be available for you to sign up
- We expect you to sign up for the shifts that you want to work so we will know who is coming in when

To update your profile:

- Log in to your volunteer profile.
- Click on the My Profile tab.

- Click on the Qualifications tab.
- Update the trainings you have taken
- Update other information as needed – basic info, additional info, interests, availability, and goals

To log your hours:

- Log in to your volunteer profile
- Click on the Hours Log tab
- Select the appropriate activity
- Select the appropriate date
- Enter the hours you worked on that activity
- Enter your accomplishments as indicated

To access the MyVolunteerPage system on your smart phone, go to MyVolunteerPage.mobi.

APPENDIX C



Volunteer Safety Expectations

The safety of our guests, employees, and volunteers is ALWAYS our first priority! In the event of an emergency, FSAS staff members will give direction to all customers and volunteers. **As an FSAS volunteer, you acknowledge that you are responsible for your own safety and take responsibility for your own actions. You also agree to follow and uphold the following guidelines:**

- Always take responsibility for yourself first. FSAS staff will take action to ensure that all animals and volunteers are safe.
- Always sign in and out each day. During a disaster, the supervisor on duty will facilitate an evacuation, taking the daily sign-in log with them. This is how all individuals will be accounted for once safely away from the disaster.

Facility Safety:

- Identify and familiarize yourself with all emergency exits and safety equipment
- Keep Paths Clear – Do not block paths and/or doorways. Blocking paths and/or doorways can be a tripping hazard and/or cause injury to FSAS staff, volunteers or customers. It is important to keep paths and doorways clear in case of emergency for an evacuation and emergency crews.
- Let your FSAS staff supervisor or a fellow volunteer know when you are leaving the program area
- Communicate any accident or injury to the FSAS staff supervisor immediately. Staff will address the situation to solve the problem. As a volunteer, you are covered under the City of Sacramento Worker's Compensation Program. Not identifying an accident can make matters worse and cause subsequent injury to yourself or another individual.

Personal Safety:

- Always wear a volunteer apron and name badge during your volunteer experience
- Follow proper lifting procedures and do not lift anything that is too heavy for you to move. Ask your FSAS staff supervisor for an explanation of lifting procedures. If you are asked to move anything of substantial weight and feel comfortable doing so, bend your knees into a squatting position and lift with your legs. Do not bend at the waist and lift with your back as this is the primary cause of many back injuries. If you are uncomfortable lifting any item, please let your FSAS staff supervisor know.
- Communicate any serious medical conditions you may have to the FSAS staff supervisor

Animal Safety:

- Volunteers are not allowed to work with our animals until they have taken the appropriate training classes. Once training is complete, please use caution when dealing with animals to ensure you are not taking on an animal you are unable to handle.

- Volunteers are not allowed to interact with the animals in the Reception building, Quarantine or Isolation areas.
- Immediately communicate any injury caused by an animal to the supervisor on duty

Threats, Violence or Suspicious Activity:

- No volunteers should confront anyone acting threatening or suspicious. Notify an FSAS staff member immediately, and prompt, appropriate action will be taken.
- When leaving the premises, if you notice anyone threatening or suspicious near the facility, go back inside the building to notify an FSAS staff member
- If you see or hear anything suspicious, notify an FSAS staff member immediately.

Safety Guidelines

The safety of our guests, employees and volunteers is ALWAYS our first priority.

- Wear closed-toed shoes & long pants – dress appropriately!
- Put all tools away after use – never leave something for someone else to deal with (or trip over)!
- Do not interact with animals you have not been trained to handle & only handle those animals you are physically capable of handling
- Use appropriate lifting techniques & don't lift something too heavy for you
- Do not ever give treats to dogs when more than one dog is in the kennel ► Report any injury immediately!
- Know where to find first aid kits, fire extinguishers, water, and phones
- Always carry a radio in the kennel areas
- No ear buds in the kennel areas – if you want to protect your ears, use the disposable ear plugs

Cleanliness Guidelines

Safety often hinges upon cleanliness. Cleanliness is also a key element in providing a quality experience to our animals, staff, and guests, and makes a much more pleasant working environment.

- Everyone is responsible for cleaning up his or her own messes!
- Everyone is responsible for picking up trash or poop when noticed.
- Everyone makes time to clean the areas the public uses.
- Everyone helps colleagues clean up when needed.
- Everyone is responsible for picking up any messes they see, even when they didn't make it!

- Everyone is responsible for having a neat, well-groomed appearance when coming to Front Street.