City of Austin
Office of the City Auditor

Special Report

Animal Services Program Audit Follow-Up

August 2022

This is a special report as part of a series following up on recommendations made in previous audits.

The Animal Services Office has not fully implemented a key recommendation from our 2015 Animal Services Program audit. We recommended management evaluate shelter operations and implement strategies to comply with state requirements and recommended best practices for animal housing and care. Animal Services management has made some efforts to address the recommendation. However, it appears the City's animal shelter is still overcrowded, and response times to citizen emergency calls may be untimely.

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Cover: Austin Animal Center, photo by Office of the City Auditor, 2022.

Objective

The objective of this special report was to follow up on the City's actions to implement recommendations from the 2015 Animal Services Program audit.

Background

We conducted an audit of the Animal Services Program as part of the Office of the City Auditor's 2014 Audit Plan. This work was based on risks identified by our office and interest in Animal Services operations from City Council and the public. The objective of that audit was to evaluate Animal Services operations as compared to best practices and to determine whether they comply with applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The audit focused on animal kennel care, call response times, and drug inventory management. We issued three findings (see Appendix A) and three recommendations (see Appendix B).

In March 2017, we followed up on all three recommendations as part of our annual follow-up project. At that time, we found that Animal Services management had implemented two of the three recommendations, as shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: In 2017, we verified Animal Services had implemented two of three recommendations issued in our 2015 audit

#	Recommendation	Verified Status
1.	Evaluate kennel shelter operations and implement strategies to ensure Animal Services complies with state requirements and meets recommended best practices.	Underway
2.	Establish policies and procedures to ensure information collected on department operations is complete and accurate.	Implemented
3.	Establish policies and procedures to safeguard shelter drug inventories.	Implemented

Source: Fiscal Year 2017 Office of the City Auditor Follow-Up Project, March 2017

This report focuses on Animal Services' efforts to implement Recommendation 1.

Visit the City's open data portal to learn more about the City's progress on recommendations from other audits.

What We Learned

Summary

The Animal Services Office has not fully implemented a key recommendation from our 2015 Animal Services Program audit. We recommended management evaluate shelter operations and implement strategies to comply with state requirements and recommended best practices for animal housing and care. Animal Services management has made some efforts to address the recommendation. However, it appears the City's animal shelter is still overcrowded, and response times to citizen emergency calls may be untimely.

What has the City done to address issues identified in the recommendation?

In the 2015 audit, we found the Animal Services Office (Animal Services) did not have sufficient facilities and resources allocated, as indicated by overcrowding at the Austin Animal Center and continued use of the Town Lake Animal Center. In addition, animals in the shelters were not consistently receiving the recommended level of care, and response times to many citizen calls related to aggressive or injured animals and police requests for assistance were not timely. Below are details related to Animal Services management's actions to address the recommendation.

Recommendation 1: The Chief Animal Services Officer should evaluate kennel shelter operations and implement strategies to ensure Animal Services complies with applicable state requirements and meets recommended best practices for the housing and care of animals. Areas of review should include:

a) determining the optimum level of staff needed for kennel operations to meet best practices for animal care

In the 2015 audit, we found that due to inadequate staffing in the kennel and field operations, animals in the shelters were not consistently receiving the level of care recommended by best practices. For example, Animal Services did not have sufficient staffing to meet the minimum 15 minutes of animal care per day that was recommended by the standards. We recommended that Animal Services evaluate shelter operations to determine the optimum level of staff needed.

We did not see documented evidence that management performed an evaluation to determine the optimum level of staffing needed to meet best practices for housing and care of animals. Since the 2015 audit, management indicated no official staffing assessments were done. According to management, staffing for kennel and field operations is determined annually, as part of the budget process, based on observed needs by the responsible managers. Since 2017, only a few of these requested positions were approved.

In addition, Animal Services management works with community volunteers to provide animal care services within the shelter. These services include cleaning kennels, walking dogs, and aiding visitors seeking

to adopt animals. Based on the Animal Center Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report, there were 353 volunteers who donated 24,905 hours of service to the City's animal shelter.

In our site visit to the Austin Animal Center, we observed the kennels were clean and the animals had clean water. However, we noted there was frequent, loud barking. Animal Services management noted this was an issue. They said the design of the building's interior and its acoustics causes dog barks and sounds to reverberate and cause stress on the animals, staff, volunteers, and visitors. Management stated efforts were being made to alleviate the acoustic issues, but funding for the cost of those improvements is currently not budgeted.

b) developing and implementing strategies to meet state requirements for animal housing and to ensure alignment with best practices related to capacity and animal care

In the 2015 audit, we found that limited space at the Animal Center coupled with long stays for animals in the shelter resulted in overcrowded animal shelters. As such, Animal Services housed animals in temporary cages over long periods of time and cohabitated animals that would have otherwise resided separately due to incompatibility issues such as aggression. In addition, we found that while Animal Services used the Town Lake Animal Center, the facility was not structurally sound nor well maintained, and did not comply with the State's animal housing requirements.

To address issues related to the deficiencies of the Town Lake Animal Center facility, the City moved out of the facility in 2017. Currently, the Austin Animal Center operates as the City's only animal shelter.

To address issues related to housing animals, Animal Services has implemented several strategies, as noted below. However, based on Animal Services management and our review of the animal daily inventory, the City's animal shelter still appears to be overcrowded, specifically for medium to large dogs. While the Austin Animal Center has 208 available kennels for medium to large dogs, a review of the inventories for four randomly selected days showed the shelter had an average of 301 medium to large dogs.

Animal Services staff noted the population of medium to large dogs does consistently exceed the capacity of the shelter. For that reason, some dogs are housed in non-public areas such as the areas reserved for sick or injured dogs, holding areas, and crates. During our site visit to the Austin Animal Center, we noted there were no empty kennels for medium to large dogs. In some of the kennels, dogs had been paired up. Since the 2015 audit, the City has 14 fewer kennels to house medium to large dogs. This is because the City built 44 new kennels at the Austin Animal Center, but lost 58 kennels by moving out of the Town Lake facility.

Animal Services has implemented several other efforts aimed at keeping animals out of the shelter, including:

- Providing education and support services to pet owners
- Finding homes for animals through the pet adoption program by hosting adoption events and occasionally waiving fees
- Simplifying the adoption process through implementation of new adoption software and an online adoption application
- Making efforts to locate owners and return animals in the field

Also, through the Out-of-State Animal Transfer Program, Animal Services transfers animals to animal rescue partners. According to management, Animal Services has transferred 760 animals to partners outside Texas since the program started in 2021. We reviewed applications and agreements for 32 of the 35 out-of-state partners that accepted animals from the Animal Service Center. We noted several issues with these documents, including:

- Required information was missing on at least 10 of the applications
- There were no application forms for 6 of the partners
- The City has not executed a formal agreement with about half (17) of the partners

c) developing and implementing strategies to ensure Animal Services timely responds to citizen emergency service calls

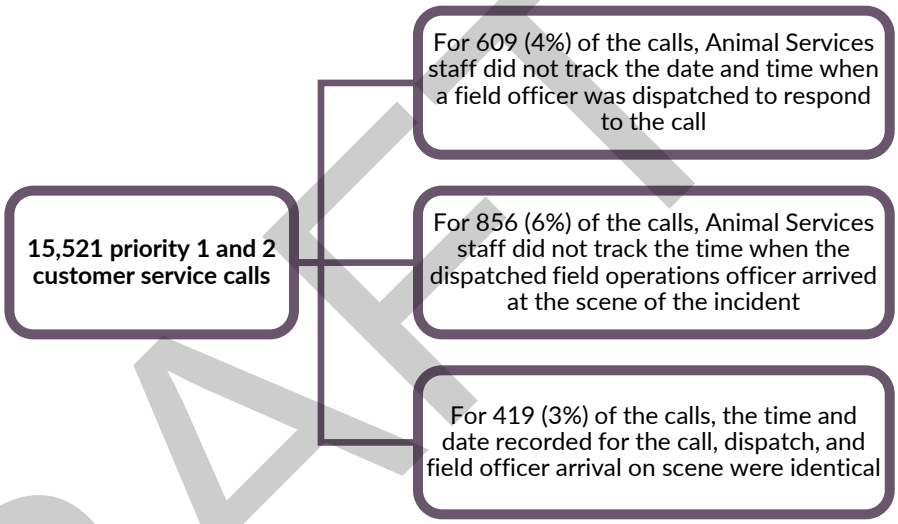
In the 2015 audit, we found response times to many citizen calls related to aggressive animals, injured animals, and police requests for assistance were untimely. For example, Animal Services was required to respond to a priority 1 call within two hours. For 29% of these calls reviewed in 2015, Animal Services did not respond until 12 or more hours after the citizen made the call. Inadequate staffing levels and Animal Services practices of encouraging field operations officers to spend significant time driving around trying to locate the owners of stray animals were noted as the key causes for those long response times.

According to Animal Services management, the department continues to face challenges responding timely to citizen service calls. Management noted inadequate staffing has an impact on timely response as well as on providing services in the field that reduce animal intake. To address this issue, Animal Services has allocated additional field operations staff to respond to calls. At the time of the 2015 audit, there were 11 Animal Protection Officers and 2 Senior Animal Protection Officers. Since the audit, management noted Animal Services added six additional staff for the unit, including through an interlocal agreement with Travis County.

However, we were unable to do a one-to-one comparison of current response times to the response times as determined in our 2015 audit. This is mainly due to the way the information is currently maintained in the information tracking tool.

We reviewed data for priority 1 and 2 customer service calls. According to Animal Services staff, a field officer has to be dispatched to the scene for these calls. As shown in Exhibit 2, we noted several issues with the data. For example, in the 2015 audit, staff did not track key information for 21% of calls. This has improved to about 8% of calls, but the issue still exists. Also, for some incidents, the call, dispatch, and response times were the same. Management indicated these instances are calls created by field staff to document when they are called for assistance by law enforcement. Management noted most of these calls are after hours and field officers generally do not respond in person.

Exhibit 2: Animal Services customer service call information was not always complete



Source: OCA analysis of Animal Services fiscal year 2021 citizen service call response reports, March 2022

Looking Ahead

While Austin has one adoption location, other cities like San Antonio and Dallas have multiple locations to support their mission. Austin Animal Services management indicated they have begun discussing the possibility of setting up satellite adoption locations in the community. However, management noted that this will need additional funding.

Appendix A: Findings Issued

Animal Services Program Audit, April 2015	
Finding 1	Animal Services does not have sufficient facilities and resources allocated to meet the City's live outcome goal and remain in line with State requirements and industry best practices. As a result, the City's animal shelters are overcrowded, animals in the shelters are not consistently receiving the level of care recommended by best practices, and response times for many citizen calls are untimely.
Finding 2	Animal Services does not have sufficient processes to record and prioritize calls, which results in unreliable data and reduces their ability to manage field operations effectively.
Finding 3	Inadequate monitoring and safeguarding of medications increases the risk that Animal Services may not comply with federal requirements or detect instances of possible misuse or waste.

Appendix B: Implementation Status of Recommendations

Animal Services Program Audit, April 2015		
Recommendation 1	The Chief Animal Services Officer should evaluate kennel shelter operations and implement strategies to ensure Animal Services complies with applicable state requirements and meets recommended best practices for the housing and care of animals. Areas of review should include: a) determining the optimum level of staff needed for kennel operations to meet best practices for animal care, b) developing and implementing strategies to meet state requirements for animal housing and to ensure alignment with best practices related to capacity and animal care, and c) developing and implementing strategies to ensure Animal Services timely responds to citizen emergency service calls.	Underway
Recommendation 2	The Chief Animal Services Officer should establish policies and procedures to ensure information collected on department operations, such as records of call responses, is complete and accurate, including: a) providing documented guidance to dispatch staff on the criteria for categorizing customer service calls, and b) ensuring that field staff track, collect, and report all necessary information regarding each service call including reasons for not responding.	Implemented
Recommendation 3	The Chief Animal Services Officer should establish policies and procedures to safeguard shelter drug inventories, including policies and procedures for: a) drug purchases, receiving, storing, and use; b) separation of duties; and c) disposal of expired or defective drugs, including the documentation, storage, and segregation of expired drugs from unexpired drugs.	Implemented

Scope

The project scope included actions taken by the Animal Services Office to respond to Recommendation 1 in the 2015 Animal Services Program audit.

Methodology

To complete this special report, we performed the following steps:

- Communicated with City staff in the Animal Services Office
- Reviewed reports and documents relevant to recommended actions
- Performed a site visit to the Austin Animal Center and observed kennel operations
- Reviewed Council resolutions and discussions, City memos, budget information, news articles, and other relevant documents
- Evaluated management actions to respond to relevant recommendations

Project Type

This project is considered a non-audit project under Government Auditing Standards and was conducted in accordance with the ethics and general standards (Chapters 1-5).

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. Special requests are designed to answer specific questions to assist Council in decision-making. We do not draw conclusions or make recommendations in these reports.

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