

To: BOC
 From: Pegge Adams
 Regarding: Status of GCAC, Incidents, Questions, Outcomes, Recommendations
 Date: December 27, 2013

At our last BOC meeting, Commissioner Curtis asked me to provide responses to the questions raised during public comment, and I am happy to do so. It has taken somewhat longer to complete this document than I originally expected. As I spent time on this, I realized that something more comprehensive than I had originally planned was warranted, due to the complexity and long-term nature of problems. There are certain patterns of complaint that seem to be consistent over time, even though there have been a variety of changes at GCAC. Commissioners who have chaired this committee, even in the distant past, have shared with me that it was the worst assignment they had while on the Board, due to the ongoing conflict. So, it seems prudent to explore why this might be and possibilities for improvement going forward.

Also, several incidents have happened since that meeting have a bearing on GCAC operation.

Incidents Related to GCAC Since December 11:

There have been some security concerns. Following the contentious public comment on December 11, Interim Chief Lazar received a death threat via telephone at GCAC. On December 16, 2013, there was a break-in at GCAC just after 6:00 p.m. The two incidents are probably not related, but both are reasons to evaluate security. I've discussed our capabilities to trace any future calls of this nature with our IT Director, and a plan is in place to handle that eventuality. With regard to the break-in, several measures have been taken to improve security.

Also following the BOC meeting on December 11, there was some sort of bogus posting on Craigslist led to both public misinformation and a spam attack sent to commissioners. I did not see this posting, but at least a portion alleged that we do not check for microchips. I know this because I received a call from someone who read the posting and was very upset by this. I assured her that GCAC has scanners and uses them. Another result of the bogus Craigslist posting appears to be a new rash of spam, which you have probably found in your inbox as well. Our IT Director has identified the source and believes that we should consider a harassment suit. Since this has occurred previously when there has been disagreement on GCAC issues, and it does cause some disruption, we may wish to consider this.

Background on Recurring Questions/Concerns/Conflict

There are several questions that keep recurring. I have personally asked and answered them many times in the past six months (the length of time I have chaired the GCAC sub-committee). Some of the same individuals keep asking the same questions. If the answer isn't what they want to hear, they ignore it, call it an excuse, or launch into a fresh personal attack. You might wonder why this is so; I certainly have. It seems to constitute an ongoing conflict. Following discussion of the background, I will again answer the recurring questions, which involve euthanasia rates, stray policy, locked ward policy, feeding and sanitation. After that, I don't plan to discuss them further. The specific newer concerns deserve a careful response. I have looked into them, and a detailed response will follow the reprise of answers to the recurring questions.

It is important to remember the differences between individuals who have raised concerns. The individuals vary from a few very extreme, as in bordering on mental instability, to those who simply have questions. Most are between those two points. Some, but not all, volunteer at the shelter. *It is important to note that not all volunteers are involved in creating conflict.* To voice concerns in a civil manner can be a part of resolving problems and is a good thing, but a lack of civility and respect is not a good thing. Many who volunteer do not voice concerns or do so in a constructive manner. Some simply devote a lot of time to improving conditions. That is very beneficial, and that was the vision behind expanding the volunteer program. Some have really

been extraordinary. It is also important to note that many of those who are both volunteers and part of the conflict have also contributed, some by dog walking and other care, some materially. A group and an individual have pledged to help with the cost of improving the dog walking runs, a project that we can all agree on, and that will be completed soon. Some have contributed practical ideas and products.

While volunteers have helped, in important ways, those who are “micromanagers” have created some real problems. Volunteers who do not wish to be part of an “us/them” way of thinking have reported that they felt intimidated. Both staff and policy are criticized and ridiculed on a regular basis, both in the shelter, online, and in other media. One interesting facet is the lack of acknowledgement of progress and lack of support for any idea not put forth by them. For instance, when the current Interim CACO served previously, she instituted humane euthanasia, so that animals are now put to sleep by injection (not gassed, electrocuted or shot). She also changed a policy of breed specific euthanasia, so that any euthanasia determination is based on the individual dog, not breed. These were important and compassionate changes, yet not mentioned in the screed that she is not a “compassionate director” because of euthanasia numbers.

These self-appointed experts do not respect staff, nor do they recognize their expertise. They also do not respect policy. One example is unauthorized feeding. Some have insisted on giving extra food to dogs who have been starved prior to rescue by GCAC. It is very important to be careful about the feeding schedule with such dogs. Too much food too soon can cause torsion, a life threatening condition. Yet there is always someone who insists on giving dogs extra food outside the regular schedule. Another example was the misguided overreaction to Interim Chief Lazar’s decision to suspend outdoor dog walking for a week after the radio tower was broken during the recent high winds. It was dangling dangerously in the walking area. The front yard area was not fenced, and since some walkers had been observed losing dogs within the fenced walking area, the risk was not acceptable to the Interim Chief. Although it was difficult, some exercise was accomplished indoors. Information was gathered, the insurance company and risk manager made a decision, and a company was directed to secure tower until it could be removed. The afternoon it was secured, the “micromanagers” returned to the grounds after hours and invited a reporter from a TV station to come out. Luckily, the site was secured, because had anyone been injured during their after-hours trespass, the county would have been liable. Being on the GCAC grounds after hours is against policy, specifically stated in the volunteer handbook, because of liability concerns. When the RFP came out to consider privatization of GCAC, they scoffed at the requirements for insurance and experience in actually running a shelter, so it appears that they do not consider that liability concerns valid (or experience).

I believe that all volunteers have a sincere concern for animals. The difficulties lie in how some handle a difference of opinion on policy. Those who are part of a constructive process seem to recognize every improvement and feel like progress is being made. When there are disagreements, they share information, listen for the answers to their questions, and accept that the professionals are doing their best. They seem to have some perspective about the complexity of running GCAC and recognize that, while continuous improvement is something everyone hopes to see, there are some things we cannot do at this point.

Those who engage in a destructive process tend to see any disagreement as proof of dark motives on the part of staff. They handle the situation by engaging in character assassination. There is a tendency toward overreaction and an us/them mentality that creates urgency and drama. A lack of perspective leads them to disregard any facts that don’t support what they believe to be true, but a quick belief in any story that does. Details of those stories often prove exaggerated for effect to support a negative allegation, but missing if they support a different view. In some cases, a self-righteous, self-important, and judgmental demeanor is very evident. Some contend that they represent the public as a whole, but this is not the case. One of the emails sent recently wondered why we wouldn’t ask the writer for help, yet the content in that email contained a lot of misinformation, displayed a lack of understanding of the issues, and

promoted the self-importance of the author. Disdain for staff and commissioners was quite clear. This attitude is common, even though none of these individuals have worked as employees in an Animal Control facility. Some are simply online bystanders, who don't volunteer at GCAC and don't even live in this area. Others are volunteers, but the volunteer role is quite different, optional and without the same level of responsibility. Tunnel vision allows some individuals to oversimplify and become very impatient when decisions don't go their way.

There is a nationwide network of like-minded individuals, linked by FaceBook pages and other media. The Michigan network has been involved in a number of counties. The use of semantic tricks and framing seems quite strategic, and often a consistent message with the same emotional buzzwords will appear again and again. The overriding strategy seems to be to destroy credibility of the professionals and shelter operation, then replace with those of their choosing. In several counties, they have been successful in getting the CACO to resign or be fired. Sometimes this is done with political intimidation, but sometimes just with misinformation.

This was the case with me. I was recently accused by an individual (first in the GCAC Subcommittee meeting, then at the BOC meeting) that I have "fought them" at every turn. This is a strange contention for several reasons. As you know, I was originally one of their champions. I believed they were people of good will who just wanted to work together to make GCAC the best it can be. I could not understand why volunteers were so restricted, and some policies seemed unfriendly to those who wanted to help. When I took the chairmanship in June, I immediately tried to implement some recommendations made by the recently formed Advisory Panel. Commissioner Young had asked them to form a group to come up with constructive suggestions, rather than various individuals and groups constantly loading him with complaints. It appeared this was yielding some fruit, and I moved quickly to implement some of them. The one touted as a "no brainer" was actually quite contentious, because there was history. Cell phones and ID's had to be checked in before anyone could go into kennels, because of misconduct on the part of certain individuals. Nonetheless, it seemed like overkill to inconvenience the general public because of the actions of a few, so the change was made. There was a period of flux wherein there were three different acting CACOs in two months. It was pretty hectic. My first clue that the situation might be different than I had thought was when complaints began about the pace of adopting recommendations. That seemed odd, given the short amount of time and number of challenges. Then there was the incident that appeared to indicate an overuse of euthanasia. As you know, this uproar led to the temporary restriction of euthanasia to most severe cases, evaluated by only the vet. The discontented were delighted with this turn of events, and we seemed to be on the same page. Then, we began to diverge. When the Interim Chief was named, attacks on her began. I began to see that allegations were not backed up by facts. For instance, the current Interim CACO had been presented to me as totally unacceptable, and the impression was created that she left under a cloud of failure. Then I found out that she left in good standing. When I met with her, I found that she had extensive experience and had shown leadership during her tenure, despite difficult conditions, including extreme reductions in staff, due to the county's financial concerns. She also experienced harassment from some of the same individuals expressing concerns at this time. When she was named Interim Chief, negative comment ramped up, even though she worked very hard to solve problems and put in large amounts of uncompensated time. She maintained a positive and professional attitude. Restricted euthanasia created a larger population and some sanitation problems. Road Officers were pulled in to help, and it was brought under control. Still, we needed to get officers back on the road, because those duties were pressing. To my surprise, when I was able to find monies for two part-time temporary kennel attendants, the idea was not embraced, but opposed. The lack of logic was stunning. Far more stunning was the response when our veterinarian issued a report that evaluated the consequences of our temporary restriction on euthanasia. The unintended consequences were compelling, the report was factually prepared, and the Advisory Panel folks had formerly expressed complete confidence in her, yet as soon as it was made public, the bashing began. The destructive process characteristics were in full evidence. I began to see the situation in a very different light. Because I now disagreed with them, it was my turn to be torn

down. If nothing changes going forward, any commissioner in this seat will have the same problems

Answers to Recurring Questions/Concerns

Euthanasia Rates:

At this time, there are only two reasons for euthanasia, health and behavior. We have not euthanized for space or length of time in the shelter, even though the last change in county policy would have allowed for that, if necessary. The method of euthanasia is humane, by injection. Once we tightened health criteria for incoming strays, numbers have dropped and overall animal health is better.

Some very high euthanasia rates have been alleged by those critical of GCAC, some stating as high as 80-90 %, but I was pretty sure that could not be, because I've been checking weekly and that was not what I was seeing. So I went back and reviewed the monthly reports. There are a number of ways to evaluate these numbers, but I settled on looking at the monthly disposition numbers. By adding the "save" numbers (return to owner, adoption, and shelter transfer) and incineration numbers, we get the total disposition numbers (the intake numbers don't give you that, because the time between intake and disposition varies). I looked at the July-November reports, which covers the span when I began to monitor GCAC more carefully and the Interim Director was hired. For comparison, I looked at the reports for May and June, 2013, and the 2012 Annual Report to the state.

I found an overall save rate of 40% for cats in the five month period. The worst month for cats was October, when severe illness that been hiding under URI symptoms in incoming strays spread to a larger population. Our save rate was a dismal 22% that month. That was truly awful, but even at that low point, the eutho rate was not more than 78%. The best month was November, with a save rate of 53%, and therefore a eutho rate of less than 47%. The average save rate was 40%, so the average maximum eutho rate for cats in 60%. The reason why the actual eutho rate is somewhat less is that the "not saved" (incinerated) category also includes dead animal pick-ups and those who die of illness or injury shortly after arrival. This is not separated by type of animal.

For dogs, the average save rate over this time period was 46%. There were no large differences month to month, with rates staying in the 40's. So for dogs, the average maximum eutho rate during that period was 54%. Dogs have a higher return-to-owner rate (101 during this period) than cats (1).

Comparing these rates to 2012, the dog save/eutho rates are the same. The cat rates were much worse, with 26% save and 74% eutho. June 2013 rates were 35% save, 65% eutho for dogs, and 9% save, 91% eutho for cats. May, 2013 rates were 43% save, 57% eutho for dogs, and 17% save, 83% eutho for cats. So it appears we did have some very high eutho rates for cats at those times. It also appears that we have made great improvements for cats in the last six months, while the dog rates have remained about the same. It is clear that contentions that we currently have extraordinarily high euthanasia rates are false.

Information for December just came in, so I am inserting it here, rather than recalculating figures. These figures are the best we've had: 113 dogs (61%) saved, 72 (39%) euthanized, 87 cats (60%) saved, 56 (40%) euthanized. I am very encouraged.

Stray Status:

Several concerns have been raised regarding stray status for longer than state requirements and lack of exercise during stray status. Some have alleged that holding longer than required by state law is against state law. I checked on state requirements, and the state does not have any

maximum requirement, just minimum. Therefore, the length of time that an animal is held on stray status is up to the discretion of the management of a given shelter; it is not determined by state law. While there is a good deal of righteous indignation regarding not being able to walk strays, volunteers have yet to achieve the goal suggested by the Pedigree grant (20 minutes twice per day) for the adoptables that they do access. Being confined to a cage is not optimal, but it is not cruel. It has several important benefits. Our policy on strays has spared us some contagion. Although we have had a number of dogs with parvo, there is no indication they contracted it at GCAC (there is an incubation period of approximately two weeks). By confining the stray dogs to cages, we can avoid dog A, who has been running the streets for awhile, from giving parvo to dog B, who is someone's cherished pet, and also the other dogs in the shelter who came in clear of infection. Also, dog C, who is somewhat aggressive, though not to the extent that indicates locked ward, has a chance to settle down and not bite the walker or dog B. These dogs cannot be handled prior to evaluation for good reason. Those who feel that a dog can be evaluated as soon as they come in are mistaken. The law is not being broken, there are good reasons for this policy, and it will remain in effect. When the time comes that we have monies for structural improvements at GCAC, there are a number of possibilities that would improve animal comfort while on stray status. Since there are not even resources for adequate staffing, however, that is probably not a topic for the near future.

Locked Ward:

With very few exceptions, animals are assigned to the locked ward for good reasons. Safety and health are the main ones. Animals who have been aggressive when picked up need time to settle down. An injured animal will likely be given pain medication. None of these animals should have visitors, unless it is the dog's owner.

Several signs posted in the shelter advise owners looking for lost dogs to go to the front counter to check if their dog is in the locked ward. Shelter Pro sheets, which have information and a picture for each dog in the locked ward, are in a binder at the counter. This will continue to be the case, unless we get a court case dog. Those will not be in the binder.

Feeding:

Adult dogs in good health are fed the recommended amount once per day. Puppies and health compromised dogs are fed twice per day, or more if indicated by condition. It is important that volunteers or members of the general public not feed animals unless asked, because it can cause problems. Even snacks should be approved for a given animal. Sometimes an item like a hot dog can cause vomiting.

Sanitation:

The controversy over sanitation is somewhat covered under "Background", but to add to that, I have dropped in at all different times of day and have seen no problems in recent months. The temporary kennel attendants have been instrumental in helping to maintain good sanitation without pulling several officers off the road. The permanent kennel attendant has become increasingly busy with clerical responsibilities. ShelterPro is an excellent program that will help us to keep much better records and better customer service, but it is time consuming, so he is routinely on counter duty. Also, the Treasurer's Office has asked him to use Excel to keep track of funds. While this is also a good development to improve record keeping, it is also time consuming. Although sanitation is presently very good, I am concerned that we will have problems in that area when we lose the temporary attendants, unless we pull officers off the road.

Specific Recent Questions/Concerns

Dog Behavioral Evaluation:

With regard to the dog named Chester, there seems to have been difference in perception. A week or so previous to this situation, Ms. Lazar evaluated a dog and had reservations, based on some body language, about its suitability for adoption. She felt some pressure to clear the dog, however, because there was not anything definitive, and the dog had many supporters. A week later, the dog bit its walker. So, when she evaluated Chester, she had that in mind. Still, Chester was a charmer and the indicators were mild, so he was cleared and adopted. He came back, because of allergy problems of a family member. She reevaluated, and the previous indicators were more pronounced. So, she decided not to risk anyone getting injured. Now many have protested that he was a wonderful dog. That may be. But we have all been aware of stories where “wonderful dogs” turn on family members and others, unexpectedly causing damage. Were there really no indicators, or were they just not obvious to most people? Ms. Lazar has been evaluating dogs for a long time, and is very knowledgeable, despite the constant second guessing of some very vocal persons. To my knowledge, none have them have ever worked (as an employee) at an Animal Control facility. Being a volunteer is very different than being an employee. If someone is injured, the volunteer who said “that’s a great dog—you should clear him for adoption” will not bear the responsibility. During the period of time when an outside consultant evaluated, some dogs were cleared that proved problematic for volunteer walkers. This sort of thing is difficult, and I don’t think the call was made lightly. Even so, in order to give more possibility to animals she cannot, in good conscience, clear for general adoption, she has now proposed to allow individuals from rescue organizations to adopt dogs who might be good dogs with continued training (project dogs). A dog who demonstrates clear aggression will not be eligible, but the “tough call” dogs will.

Black Lab in Stray:

Regarding comments and questions on black Lab that supposedly was kept in stray since Nov. 24: this was not the “letter dog” (wherein the dog was held longer because the owner had moved and needed to be located, then registered letter sent) that I originally thought. It turns out that there have been two black Labs in that cage since that time. The first came in on November 24 and was euthanized due to health. The second Lab was moved to adoption on Dec. 16. There was some confusion on paperwork, and when Chief Lazar went to evaluate dog #1 on Dec. 4, unaware of previous disposition of case, she found dog #2, also a black Lab, but not the same dog. She asked staff to find dog #2’s paperwork. They were unable to find it, and she finally just made a new card Dec. 12. You might reasonably ask why this happened.

The old card system lent itself to confusion. When there were many people at the counter, the cards were not always made out in detail in the interests of time. In addition, if interrupted before filing or while pulling a card to provide information, cards were sometimes misplaced. That’s what happened in this case.

ShelterPro is very detailed and includes a picture. The record will be in the computer, but also posted on the animal’s cage. Although it is time consuming, it should prevent mix-ups in the future.

Dog Call on Maryland Street

Another concern reported right after the BOC meeting involved a dog call that involved a dog with its head stuck, needing rescue. It was stated that an officer came out, said she couldn’t take care of it by herself, but would be back. Then the officer did not come back. On the face of it, it sounds terrible, impossible to understand. I asked for a specific date, name of person who reported, any other information. I did not get any specific contact information on the person who made the call. Some said it was a neighbor who noticed the dog stuck by a vacant house. Some said it

happened the week before, but several said it was October. One called to say she had removed the dead dog. She didn't see why the officer couldn't have removed the dog, since she was able to do so.

Without specific date or name, it was not possible to look this up. There are regularly calls in that area. One officer said she recalled a situation like that, but in this case, the house had prominent "No Trespassing" signs and while it appeared vacant, that couldn't be determined with any certainty by observation. Road officers are not armed and have been threatened on these types of calls, so standard practice is to have a police officer on site. This is not always possible to do in a timely fashion. Without a police officer onsite, she could not continue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With our system of county government, I believe that one of the more important aspects of commissioner responsibilities is to provide citizen oversight of our departments. Individually or in groups, citizens cannot practically do this. However well intended, "too many cooks in the kitchen" just makes a mess, and interferes with the ability of the professionals we hire to perform their duties effectively. It is incumbent on us, as the chosen "amateurs" to ask questions and gather information, and endeavor to ensure that the delivery of service we have is effective. Integral to this is a careful examination of facts and how they relate to the context of whatever situation requires closer examination.

Having done that, I have found no evidence of misconduct by staff, although their overall morale and performance has been negatively impacted by harassment by the "micromanagers". There are also the benign distractions by the well-intentioned. When I feed my cats, they have a tendency to swarm around my ankles and probably think they are speeding up my filling the bowls, but of course, they slow my down considerably. Sometimes that can be that way with people as well. I believe the computer that will be available for volunteers or general public to log ideas, concerns, questions and observations will eliminate some distractions for staff. It will also be necessary to correct some of the negative actions, such as policy violations or verbal abuse of staff, by banning some individuals from the site for a period of time. The vicious online comment will probably continue, which is a shame, but if we can remove some stress from the workplace, that will help. It is a high stress job. The employees care about animals and have fostered and adopted animals from the shelter themselves. The only way to deal with euthanasia duties is to know it is the right thing to do, that an animal or human is being spared suffering. When people care, it is debilitating to endure the constant harsh criticism.

Performance has also been impacted by understaffing. When employees are stretched at GCAC, calls can get missed or be uncompleted, records can get spotty, sanitation can be less than optimal, responses to the public can get crusty. Fatigue takes a toll. Why do we have continuing problems? Because it is a tough job, and we have only been staffing to maintain a minimal performance level. If we want better performance, we need adequate staffing.

Volunteers cannot fill that gap, although they have helped. The volunteer program is valuable and must be continued. We need to find ways to recognize constructive engagement in improving conditions for animals, but destructive approaches cannot be tolerated. It needs to be a humane environment for people, as well as animals.