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Report to the Board of Animal Services Commissioners

Edward A. Boks, General Manager

COMMISSION MEETING DATE: December 17, 2007

PREPARED BY: John Forland

REPORT DATE: December 7, 2007

TITLE: Sr. Management Analyst II

SUBJECT: CONSULTANT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

BOARD ACTION RECOMMENDED:

That the Board receive and file the Volunteer Program Report and direct Department staff to further implement findings of the Report.

Summary:

The Department selects and trains volunteers to support shelter operations for care and maintenance of animals and kennels, public adoption assistance, and staff support at Mobile Pet Adoption events. This valuable program raises the level of care of animals, supports full-time staff efforts, and partially offsets budget reductions. However, the Volunteer Program was not thriving over the past several years. By 2006 the Program was viewed as inefficient and the number of volunteers had significantly dropped. Tension between staff and volunteers, lack of training, and diminished respect for the contributions of volunteers were frequently cited issues. As a result, the Board of Animal Services Commissioners requested a comprehensive evaluation of the Volunteer Program.

The Department initiated several steps in 2006 to upgrade the volunteer program including the execution of a Professional Services Contract (C-111099) in December 2006 with a well-qualified consultant, Erica Meadows, to provide a frank review, identify weaknesses and

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recommend program improvements. Review and Analysis of Los Angeles Animal Services Volunteer Program, (Report) was submitted in July 2007. The Report provides both overarching findings and many specific suggestions. The Department worked closely with the consultant during preparation of the Report, and was able to incorporate some suggestions immediately with positive results. Efforts to incorporate these common sense changes will continue. The Report is summarized below.

During the early part of the consultant's background research, investigation, analysis, and formulation of recommendations, which started informally in January of 2007 and concluded with the report in July, the Department had the position of Volunteer Coordinator filled and active. Our Volunteer Coordinator followed the work of Ms. Meadows and coordinated efforts to decentralize Volunteer Liaisons into the animal care centers, which had been in the planning stages already in late 2006, and was viewed as a necessary and positive step by the consultant. However, the Volunteer Coordinator was also being targeted by animal rights activists in this period, and her work was disrupted. Finally, the terrorist Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility for vandalizing her property, from which point the Volunteer Coordinator went off work. This grievous development prevented the Department from having the appropriate staff on hand to receive, digest, and report on the consultant's findings and recommendations.

In September of 2007, the Department learned that the incumbent Volunteer Coordinator would not be returning to the Department, and sought permission to re-fill the position. This is a civil service position requiring use of a formal selection process, but no examination has been given in two years. We are currently working with the Personnel Department to establish an examination and recruit candidates from outside the City who will be qualified to take and pass the exam and receive a regular appointment. When that person who has been selected comes on board sometime in early 2008, his or her chief assignments will be to review the report, become acquainted with the status of the program today, and begin planning more intensive program improvements.

Volunteer Program Report:

Ms. Meadows conducted staff and volunteer surveys, interviewed some volunteers and staff in more depth, and personally observed volunteer operations at several shelters. A main point of her Report is that the Volunteer Program did not keep pace with growth in the Department's services because the Program was plagued by a lack of organization, a negative work environment, lack of dedicated volunteer meeting and work areas, inconsistent procedures, inadequate training, and a lack of respect by the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services (LAAS) staff for volunteers. As a result, retention of volunteers was difficult. She elaborated on these main issue areas and provided recommendations for each area.

Organization - The lack of organization, she reported, commenced with an unclear chain of command. Many volunteers were not sure to whom they reported or who gave them directions. The shelter staff also had conflicting views on how volunteers were incorporated into LAAS and what their duties were supposed to be.

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Ms. Meadows recommended that LAAS delineate the chain of command from volunteer through District Manager. She noted that during her evaluation period, LAAS enhanced the volunteer program by assigning a full-time Volunteer Liaison to each shelter. This action has significantly reduced confusion on the part of volunteers about chain of command, work location, reporting, duties, etc. By giving volunteers a knowledgeable go-to person, this strategy also reduces the burden on other staff in the animal care center to assist volunteers to find assignments.

To further strengthen organization and eliminate conflicts of interest, she recommended that Volunteer Liaisons report to the Director of Volunteer Programs (DVP, Volunteer Coordinator) and not to the shelter staff. This will be implemented with the filling of the Volunteer Coordinator position.

Procedures – The consultant further recommended that a mandate from the General Manager state that the DVP is to be consulted and integrally involved in any planning process regarding the use of volunteers. This mandate would eliminate the possibility of one shelter unilaterally changing procedures without prior approval or asking volunteers to perform duties for which they have not been properly trained. These recommendations are under review.

Environment – Ms. Meadows also recommended that a Volunteer Center be established in each shelter. This would provide a place for volunteers to meet with their Liaison, sign in and out, and receive information on up-coming events and training opportunities. It would also make the volunteers feel like valued members of the Department. Space specifically for volunteers has not yet been permanently designated in all animal care centers. She also recommended designating computers and supplies specifically for volunteers and allocating funds for volunteer parties and consumable supplies. These recommendations are under review. The value of separate space is not a question. In fact, it is probably essential. The question is finding appropriate space.

Training - Inadequate training was cited as one of the reasons why 60% of volunteers who attended an orientation session did not return. The consultant's surveys indicated a need on the part of both volunteer recruits and veterans to understand their volunteer roles, be adequately trained to handle them, and be provided with further educational opportunities. The training program that was recommended begins with a detailed orientation and shelter tour. Several of the consultant's recommendations regarding recruitment have been implemented including a more-thorough application form, training provided at each care center (rather than centralized training), and additional material in the volunteer handbooks.

She recommended that six achievement levels be established for volunteers. They are: Level One - Kennel Support/ Office Assistant; Level Two - Dog Devotee/ Cat Cuddler etc.; Level Three - Customer Care Greeter; Level Four - Mobile Adoptions; Level Five - Adoption Counselor; Level Six - Volunteer Mentor. Additional hands-on training would take place as the volunteers report for duty and reached their desired levels. This format is currently being followed informally by the Volunteer Liaison at each animal care center.

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She recommended drivers' training for volunteers taking animals off site to mobile adoption events, which has been implemented. She also recommended starting new programs such as Puppy Partier and Bold Brigade to improve animal care, which will be considered in the coming months when the Volunteer Coordinator position is filled.

Respect - Ms. Meadows stated there appeared to be a total lack of respect, integration and understanding of the Volunteer Program within the entire structure of LAAS – and at all levels from within the individual shelters, to the top levels of administration. She made the following recommendations: assign volunteers to the Administrative Division; allocate a budget for volunteers to meet operational needs; provide adequate supervision; and amend the grievance procedures to extend to the General Manager. The lack of respect is a serious problem that must be addressed, and in fact, some steps have already been taken. A grievance procedure was developed, and with decentralization of Volunteer Liaisons at each animal care facility, staff at each facility has been made more accountable for good volunteer-staff relations.

Conclusion:

Improvements have already been made in the Volunteer Program over the past year. At present, there are approximately 900 active volunteers working in our shelters throughout the City. This is the highest number on record. A Volunteer Liaison has been designated for each shelter. The Director of Volunteer Program position is being filled. With its many insights and extensive detail, this Report has made a valuable contribution to the Department's ability to solve problems and implement solutions.

As a result of the Report, training and the lines of communication between staff and volunteers have improved. Further improvements are possible. Additional Report recommendations may be implemented as needed to enhance achievement of the Department's mission. Some recommendations need further assessment; many of the program ideas are extracted from Ms. Meadow's experience with Pet Orphans, a private, non-profit shelter with a single location. Efforts to integrate or modify some of those ideas to work within our public, open-admissions animal care center system will be the task of the new Volunteer Coordinator, along with formulating additional suggestions. The most effective solutions will be implemented to fully restore the Volunteer Program and achieve a higher level of service.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The action of the Board of Animal Services Commissioners to receive and accept the report and implement findings has no impact on the budget. Improving volunteer services, however, indirectly improves the financial situation. The value of volunteer services is estimated at \$17/hour.

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Approved:

Edward A. Boks, General Manager

BOARD ACTION:

_____ Passed	Disapproved _____
_____ Passed with noted modifications	Continued _____
_____ Tabled	New Date _____