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Report blasts King County animal shelter

By Sharon Pian Chan
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A team of top veterinarians hired by King County Executive Ron Sims says the county's animal shelter is "dangerously over capacity," uses "inhumane" practices and suffers "gross inadequacy" in housing animals.

Sims, who sought the opinion from the University of California, Davis, the nation's pre-eminent veterinary-medicine program, in March dismissed some claims by a County Council consultant that animals had been neglected at the county's shelters in Kent and Bellevue.

The shelter lacks both an animal-care system, the UC Davis team said, and the staff to carry it out.

"The result was a breakdown in care leading to animal suffering, illness and likely unnecessarily high levels of euthanasia and death," according to a report by the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program that Sims' office provided on Tuesday.

"It verifies we have an excellent staff working in an unacceptable facility," said Carolyn Duncan, Sims' spokeswoman. "The report calls them 'heroic at times.' Now we need to fix the system and facilities."

The recommendations — hiring a director of operations, writing new animal-care protocol, hiring a shelter medical staff and starting a population-management plan — could outstrip a \$965,000 package the council and Sims put together last week to hire part-time veterinarians and more staff.

The UC Davis team spent three days at the animal shelters in January, and the report is written by five veterinarians. While they complimented the staff's care and dedication, they found:

- An unattended white poodle, unable to stand, with blood coming from its rectum covering its hind end and paws. When the vets asked about its medical condition, staff members pointed to records on the cage describing a terrier, records the vets called "unclear and impossible to decipher."
- A 12-year-old cat in a kennel so small that even curled up, he touched both walls.
- Other cats so crowded and terrified at being kept around dogs that they sat in their litter boxes.
- Dogs eating peeling paint and defecating visible amounts of it.

The \$965,000 plan is a short-term one, Duncan said, adding that both the council and executive have made shelter funding a priority for the next budget. Last week, the county projected a \$20 million shortfall this year and a \$60 million shortfall for 2009.

"We are going to take a hard look at the numbers," Duncan said.

Last year, the Metropolitan King County Council directed no more than 20 percent of animals be put down this year. The shelter says that only animals with behavioral and medical problems that could not be adopted were

euthanized in 2007. The report's authors said it's impossible to know how many animals arrived healthy and behaviorally sound but deteriorated to a point where they had to be euthanized.

The report confirmed several allegations made by a citizens committee and a council-commissioned report from no-kill activist Nathan Winograd. The UC Davis report did not find that animals were not fed and watered daily, which Winograd reported. The veterinarians also went further than the previous reports, examining the medical-care standards.

According to the UC Davis report, King County's shelter conditions make illness "nearly inevitable" because sick animals are housed with healthy ones. Animals receive little routine veterinary care other than spaying, neutering and euthanizing, and as a result sick animals go undiagnosed or are inappropriately treated by staff. One prescription hanging on a cage read: "Give one small and one big tablet," the team reported.

Housing conditions created behavioral problems that made adoption unlikely. Many cats were kept in cages in the dog room, and the majority appeared "scared, indicated by widely dilated pupils, frozen body postures, and attempts to hide behind or within the dog-food dish provided as a litter pan."

Sixty cats escaped their cages and went missing in the shelter in 2007, the report said.

Dogs were kept four to a kennel, "dangerously high levels," the report said, even though the vets visited when the number of animals was unusually low. Aggression within kennels prevented some dogs from eating. Housing at Bellevue was so insufficient that dogs were unable to defecate or urinate away from food and bedding, the report said.

"There appears to be no recognized general understanding or defined minimum standard for shelter animal health and welfare or accepted limit to suffering for individual animals ... " according to the report.

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