



June 1, 2015

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors  
105 E. Anapamu Street, Rm. 407  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

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Volunteers  
caring for  
bunnies  
at the  
Santa Barbara  
County  
Animal Shelter

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Re: Santa Barbara County Animal Services  
American Humane Society Assessment Report  
Agenda Item # D-7, June 2, 2015

Dear Chairperson Wolf and Honorable Supervisors:

Bunnies Urgently Needing Shelter, better known as BUNS, is an incorporated, non-profit all-volunteer organization that has been providing care for rabbits and guinea pigs at the Santa Barbara branch of Animal Services for over 23 years. We, like virtually all other animal welfare organizations and interested citizens in the County, strongly support the Public Health Department's current efforts to review and improve the operations of Animal Services. The "Santa Barbara County Animal Services Program Assessment" ("report") prepared by the American Humane Association ("AHA") was intended to provide a comprehensive objective basis for identifying needed changes. Unfortunately, while the report has some positive aspects, it has proven a great disappointment in many respects. The value and credibility of the recommendations made in the report vary widely. Some propose sensible and workable changes in current operating procedures that can and should be implemented. BUNS, as discussed below, strongly supports the recommendations for developing formal contractual agreements with the independent volunteer organizations at County shelters, i.e., BUNS, ASAP and CAPA, and the recommendations for vastly increased training for staff and volunteers. Some other recommendations are progressive in nature, but would require increases in staffing and financial resources that the County may not be able to afford. Other recommendations are simply out of touch with realities in Santa Barbara County. Many of these recommendations also seem to either contradict each other, or be inconsistent with the factual observations reported by AHA's own team members in the report.

It is clear that in their short time here, the AHA advisory team was unable to gain a very complete understanding of the real strengths and weaknesses of current Animal Services operations, and particularly the degree to which the positive aspects of the operations are dependent upon volunteer participation. Stifling volunteer participation and reducing staff initiatives in the name of reasserting top-down control will not work in Santa Barbara County. What County Animal Services needs is a renewed commitment to:

- (1) working co-operatively with all elements of the community;
- (2) delegating responsibilities to responsible non-profit organizations where possible;

**B.U.N.S.**

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- (3) promoting teamwork rather than division between individual volunteers and staff; and
- (4) fostering inclusiveness and cooperation rather than distrust towards all individuals and organizations willing to work together positively to improve animal care, employee welfare and the level of public service at County shelters.

While there is much to be corrected in Animal Services' current operations, there is also much that can be built on rather than further eroded.

#### Report Recommendations for BUNS

With respect to BUNS, and also ASAP, our fellow independent volunteer organization at the Santa Barbara shelter, the recommendations of the report are clear and positive. Although the report contains a number of factual errors and major omissions about the full extent of our current level of animal care, financial contributions and service provided to the public, it recognizes the overall tremendous success of the independent volunteer organizations in contributing to Animal Services' mission:

“The team was impressed by the clear commitment of all the volunteers and volunteer groups taking the initiative to forge a partnership aimed at a common goal; to enhance the welfare of the animals in Santa Barbara. The facilities maintained by ASAP and BUNS served the cats and rabbits of Goleta well. All operate with care and commitment and their policies and procedures are commendable. It is recognized that this collation (sic) was formed to solve a problem which entailed inefficient government funding for programs and services contracted to be provided by SBCAS. This solution's well-intensions (sic) are applauded and viewed as creative problem solving.” (Report, p. 164.)

The report recommends that the County “Develop specific MOUs with internal partners [e.g. BUNS and ASAP] that include and define accountability and supervision.” (Chapter 12, p. 166-167.) We support this recommendation. BUNS and ASAP have historically supervised operations in the rabbit/guinea pig and cat areas of the Santa Barbara shelter with minimal administrative burden on the County. In BUNS' case, this includes not only providing 100% of daily care and paying almost all costs for rabbits and guinea pigs, but also managing adoptions, helping members of the public, funding all physical improvements, and recruiting, training and managing all volunteers.

#### Staff Recommendation for June 2 Hearing.

BUNS generally supports the recommendations of the Agenda Letter submitted by Public Health for the June 2, 2015 hearing. We specifically support the recommendation to initiate the process of creating a body of internal and external stakeholders to initiate review the report's findings and recommendations, and welcome the opportunity to serve on the Implementation Oversight Team recommended by Public Health. We do not think that anyone doubts at this point that positive changes can be made to current Animal Services operations, changes that will benefit the animals, the public and the staff and volunteers who make Animal Services function.

We do, however, have concerns over some of the more regressive recommendations and serious blind spots in the AHA report as they would affect County staff, the public, animals in County shelters and volunteers other than those belonging to BUNS or ASAP.

On the progressive side, the AHA report recommends an extensive series of “data driven” reform measures that are stated to be intended to increase adoptions and quality of life for animals at the County shelters while simultaneously reducing the numbers of animals and burden of care. The report also recommends creating a number of new positions to support this transformative process. However, it is obvious to anyone who works at the County shelters that fully implementing these recommendations would take far greater increases in staffing, training and funding, to say nothing of improved management, than the report acknowledges. We are concerned that unless the necessary funding is provided by the County, the recommendations will reduce themselves in practice to increasing the numbers of animals killed to reduce population and turning more animals-in-need away from County shelters.

Unless the Board is willing to support this far greater level of financial support, the only viable alternative is to substantially increase the extent of volunteer and non-profit support for Animal Services operations. This, however, leads to the second fundamental problem with the AHA recommendations – a very strong bias against volunteer participation. It appears that the AHA leadership believes that all volunteers who are not able to form independent organizations and take on full contractual responsibilities like BUNS should be reduced to the level of unpaid labor with little or no active say in daily operations or policy formation. It is difficult to imagine a course of action more likely to deter volunteer recruitment or participation, let alone the kind of enthusiastic participation that has resulted in extensive financial contributions and improvements in animal care and public service at County shelters in the past. We fully recognize that managing volunteers poses some challenges. These challenges, however, are ultimately no different than challenges involved in managing any staff, paid or unpaid. The fundamental criterion for evaluating any volunteer or paid staffperson should be the same: whether the person is able to work successfully with other members of a team, and within the scope of the mission and operational guidelines that have been determined best. We have no difficulty with the proposition that the occasional truly disruptive volunteer must be dealt with and either terminated or assigned to specialized tasks where they do not clash with others. Even within BUNS, we have very occasionally had to do this ourselves. But for all other volunteers, encouragement, reasonable training and full integration of staff and volunteers in the shelter work force are the keys to successful management, not top-down control and rigid defining of roles as the AHA seems to imagine. We believe the centralized command-and-control model that AHA seems to advocate is not a substitute for effective leadership, is not consistent with modern progressive management practices and certainly will not promote effective partnerships between Animal Services and volunteers, nor with outside non-profit organizations and the general public in Santa Barbara County. We hope any direction you provide to Public Health will reflect these concerns.

Sincerely,

Kimmy Swann, President  
Jean Silva, Director  
Philip Seymour, Director  
BUNNIES URGENTLY NEEDING SHELTER