

To Whom it May Concern;

I am writing to express my concern about the ability of the Humane Society of Cowlitz County to provide the humane care that the animals in their custody deserve.

I am a small animal veterinarian that has been working on a "contract" basis to provide spay and neuter services since early Summer, 2017. My view of the HSCC has never been a great one. Growing up in this area, I've never heard anyone brag about the quality of our humane society, and working in the veterinary business in this area since 2013 has only lowered my opinion even more.

When I was approached by the previous executive director about providing spay/neuter services, I was hesitant due to my previous bias, but I figured I'd give it a shot and would at least try to help with whatever I could. I knew there were going to be some things about shelter life I wasn't going to like, but would have to accept if I attempted to help them...euthanizing animals for behavioral or medical issues that are treatable with better resources, seeing the pain in the animals eyes...you've seen the Sarah McHlachlan commercials.

Unfortunately, there's much more than the "usual" shelter sadness in that facility, and it's never going to change...or at least hasn't in the last 30+ years and isn't showing any signs of improvement now. The current "interim" director has no interest in improving it to current standards, and I have little confidence that they'll be able to find anyone better to replace him. The hourly employees really do seem to be doing their best and at least most really seem to care about the well being of the animals in their care, but I have strong objections to the "business plan"/management (or lack thereof).

I was very hopeful I would see some improvement when they replaced Keenan (Keenan Harvey, the former director), until I saw they replaced him with the person who had dug the proverbial hole they found themselves in and had been fired by the board just a few years ago. Unfortunately, he brought his shovel and got right back to work digging.

One of my main humane concerns was that Keenan had no problem with the fact that their non-adoptable dogs, including those in "protective custody" don't get walked...or at least haven't since before I started helping there in May 2017, when Keenan made the executive decision to kick volunteers out of the "stray ward". They live in their 6-by 6-foot kennels, urinating and defecating where they eat and sleep, covering themselves in urine/feces, and only leave the kennel to be moved next door while it's cleaned. This can last for weeks to months, with one pair of protective custody dogs being back there for nearly a year. Unfortunately, Rick didn't see that as a humane issue either, even though this is the sort of thing puppy mills are known for. It seems like he may be very slowly working on the issue under pressure from the board, but the board was completely shocked that I didn't notice a 100 percent turn around when Rick came back...apparently they have short memories :(

My latest humane issue that became the last straw, so to say, came on Monday morning, when I arrived to the shelter planning on spaying/neutering cats. When I entered the stray cat room to see who was eligible for surgery, I found a cat carrier on the floor with a written note that read, "Hit by car, in bad shape. ... 1900 hrs" Inside, there was a dead cat. One that had been alive at intake, ~ 13 hours prior, was apparently in "bad shape," but instead of seeking medical treatment with their contracted provider, calling me, or calling in someone that could euthanize the cat to end its suffering, they let it suffer in a cat carrier until it succumbed to its injuries. Sounds pretty "humane," huh?

I decided right there that I would no longer be associated with the facility, recommend adopting from them, nor support their further existence in any way. Unfortunately, this isn't a unique incident and more of a sign of the "status quo" down there. A friend of mine, who had worked there previously had a similar experience, but instead of a dead cat, she found one with a severely fractured, dangling leg that had just been put in a kennel for 3+ days without anyone seeking veterinary care, or telling her. Who does not have written protocols that animal control brings injured animals to their contracted veterinarian, or seeks euthanasia?! Apparently HSCC. At this point, I highly doubt they'll even be able to find a vet that will work for them. I think I was the last one that hasn't already walked out or never considered working their (sic) in the first place. Without a vet, they can't even continue limping along as they have been.

They DO NOT have the best interest of the animals as their primary goal. I believe the board does...maybe. They've done a horrible job holding their Executive Directors accountable, and I think are therefore equally responsible. Even if the board really does want to improve the place, I doubt they'll find anyone qualified to improve it that is able/willing to work for what they're able to pay.

Could the place be turned around to a proper shelter, meeting current requirements for humane treatment, minimal medical standards, minimal intake to adoption times? Sure...can you afford to pay them what it would take? I don't know...but I doubt it since they've been severely underfunded for decades. Even if they got the funding, will they be able to find the talent? The last time they hired an executive director they interviewed two people...and hired the one with NO experience as the best option. I just don't have the highest hopes :(

I honestly urge you to find other options, for the sake of the animals.

The Humane Society for SW Washington would be an excellent place to start discussing options with. Perhaps Cowlitz County could have a very small shelter for animal control and overnight to 3 days holds, then get them to a facility with proper funding, staffing, management and facilities to actually take care of their medical needs, asses their behavior and get them adopted out in reasonable times. HSCC has never been able to do this and it's getting worse instead of better...

I'm sorry for throwing more work on your laps, but this is a very important issue that you at least need to be aware of, especially as decisions are made whether to continue contracting with HSCC for animal control/sheltering.

Feel free to contact me if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

Aaron Gilbertsen, DVM