

Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: *Animal Services in Sonoma County
Separate and Not Equal*

The Costs and Consequences of Decentralization

Report Date: June 12, 2025

Response by: Nolan Sullivan

Title: Director

Agency/Department Name: Sonoma County Department of Health Services

FINDINGS:

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: F1, F4, F5, F6, F8, and F10

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: F3, F7, and F9

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

F3. A lack of coordination between SCAS and NBAS is an obstacle to a fully coordinated implementation of the county-wide disaster response plan for animal evacuations.

DHS Response: **We partially disagree with this finding.**

SCAS will continue to work with NBAS to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding. Ultimately, while SCAS coordinates animal disaster response at the operational area level, each jurisdiction within the county is responsible for working with its contracted animal services provider to develop an emergency response plan. If a jurisdiction requires additional support during a disaster, they can formally request assistance through the Sonoma Operational Area. This system allows for coordinated, safe, and effective mutual aid deployment, including the participation of SCAS when needed.

F7. Failure to achieve high levels of licensing in all government jurisdictions and provide access to shared information undermines mandated rabies control, makes it more difficult to return lost pets, and results in a loss of revenue.

DHS Response: **We partially disagree with this finding.**

Licensing rates within our jurisdictions are currently at or above the national average, which supports rabies control and lost pet return throughout the county, and there are communication channels in place to support disease outbreaks and coordination with providers and across jurisdictions. However, there is always room for improvement. Increasing compliance with vaccination reporting and general public awareness of licensing requirements continues to be an ongoing best management practice. Further strengthening collaboration with veterinary providers and exploring policy or technology options which could enhance

shared information and reporting could further improve licensing rates and animal health monitoring.

F9. Failure to promote the benefits and legal requirement to license dogs, and failing consistently to send license renewal reminders, contribute to low license compliance and loss of revenue.

DHS Response: **We partially disagree with this finding.**

While licensing rates within our jurisdictions are currently at or above the national average, there is always an opportunity to improve public education and outreach. In Fiscal Year 2025–2026, SCAS plans to conduct a targeted campaign to increase awareness about licensing requirements, benefits, and public safety impacts. We are also exploring ways to enhance the value proposition for pet owners, such as offering incentives or partnerships that make licensing more appealing and meaningful.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Recommendations numbered: None have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered: R4 have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered: R1 require(s) further analysis.
(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. ***This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.***)
- Recommendations numbered: None will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By November 1, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to establish an Animal Services Task Force comprising county, city, and shelter representatives to revisit the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report and recommend a governance structure for animal services that will: 1) provide county-wide oversight to ensure compliance with State Law; 2) standardize fees and engage a common licensing vendor to enhance public health and safety, licensing rates and revenue, and; 3) achieve economic efficiencies through shared resources. (F1, F3, F4- F6 and F9-F10)

DHS Response: **Recommendation R1 requires additional analysis.**

The establishment of a countywide Animal Services Task Force would be a valuable step toward addressing longstanding fragmentation in governance, service delivery, and public communication. However, success will depend on inclusive representation, respect of jurisdictional differences, and a shared willingness to explore innovative governance solutions. An analysis, including an evaluation of the feasibility and readiness with our partners, of this recommendation will be brought to the Board of Directors by December 22, 2025. If there is capacity and interest, the Department will evaluate scope during the next budget or work plan cycle.

R4. By May 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to launch a county-wide public information campaign in cooperation with the cities to explain the legal imperative and benefits of licensing pets. The campaign will commence no later than July 1, 2026. (F7-F9)

DHS Response: **Recommendation R4 has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future.**

We fully support the recommendation to launch a county-wide public information campaign to raise awareness about the legal requirement and benefits of pet licensing. DHS plans to implement a campaign in FY25-26, however conducting such an effort in coordination with other jurisdictions may not be feasible within the timeline recommended by the Grand Jury.

IA county-wide campaign with meaningful reach will require investment, including formalizing agreements with partner agencies and vendors, and developing approaches may be difficult in the current climate of budget limitations. SCAS will conduct outreach with our local partners to determine capacity for initiating this effort over the current fiscal year.

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Number of pages attached: 0