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MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 6, 2024

TO: Sara Hensley, City Manager

FROM: Nikki Sassenus, Director of Animal Services

SUBJECT: Animal Services Operational Review Management Response

In 2018, an outside consultant, Animal Shelter Services, LLC, conducted a five-day on-site review of Denton Animal Services (DAS) operations, policies, and staff (**Exhibit 1 & Exhibit 2**). The review was recently brought to the attention of the City Council, management, and department leadership, all of whom were not in their current roles during the review. The review evaluated the overall department operations including the facility, policies and operations, animal housing and care, volunteer program, and staffing levels and training. The final report outlines six critical findings; lack of SOPs and use of best practices, improper cleaning, and sanitation practices, needed volunteer program development, review of veterinary services contract provider, department management, staffing levels, and capacity for care.

In July of 2023, the City Auditor's Office initiated an investigation into DAS' canine care practices including medical health practices, nutrition, and euthanasia protocols **(Exhibit 3)**. The review concluded that while intake practices generally aligned with guidelines, health monitoring did not fully comply. Staff training was lacking, and although feeding practices aligned with guidelines, documentation was inadequate. Euthanasia practices comply with regulations, but documentation and verification of procedures could be improved.

In September 2024, the City Manager commissioned an independent consultant, Shelter Savvy, to conduct a comprehensive review of DAS's operating procedures, policies, and processes. The assessment highlights DAS's strengths, such as an open adoption policy, dedicated staff, and a strong foster program **(Exhibit 4).** However, it identifies areas for improvement including internal communication, staffing, and behavioral management of animals. The report emphasizes the importance of aligning with nationally recognized best practices, focusing on reducing intake rates, increasing adoptions, and implementing effective community cat programs. Key recommendations include discontinuing formal behavior assessments for dogs, enhancing daily playgroups, improving cat housing practices, and refining intake and medical protocols. As noted in the report, many areas of improvement had already been identified by management as needing changes to bring the shelter in line with best practices and were being addressed at the time of the review, while others identified by the report have since been addressed or scheduled for correction. The report concludes that with stable leadership and planned renovations, DAS has the potential to significantly improve its lifesaving efforts and operational efficiency.

The City Auditor's Office is currently conducting an audit project covering DAS' operations, which the City Council has authorized as part of the FY25 Annual Internal Audit Plan. The purpose of the audit is to provide assurance that Animal Services is supplying effective animal care in the shelter and the community, verifying compliance with animal control state and local regulations, and ensuring adequacy of fee collection practices. The results of this audit project are currently scheduled to be presented to the City Council on January 7th, 2025.

Past reviews of DAS have consistently highlighted challenges in meeting best practices, including unstable leadership, high staff turnover, and a lack of clear direction. These issues have resulted in poor communication, inadequate staff training, limited development opportunities, and weak accountability mechanisms. The absence of established Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) has further hindered consistency and quality in service delivery, and the management of contracted veterinary services has not been adequately addressed.

Since October 2023, DAS has made significant progress in identifying and addressing these deficiencies to align the department with recognized best practices. Completed, ongoing, and future efforts are outlined below.

While a comprehensive review of all departmental SOPs is ongoing, DAS management has prioritized and implemented SOPs in critical areas such as feeding, weight management, intake, and cleaning, with associated training provided to all staff. Management continues to review, develop, and train staff in SOPs that adhere to industry standards.

Both DAS and City Management recognize the importance of investing in the professional development of all staff. In May, three staff members were sent for training at the Texas Unites for Animals Conference, and in November, two members of the team will attend the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement Annual Conference. The management team is currently participating in the ten-month Brining Home Excellence Program with Best Friends Animal Society while the Shelter Supervisor is enrolled in the Animal Management Certification program through that same group. Additionally, several employees have been selected to engage in other valuable external learning opportunities, such as SPARK, Advanced Animal Control Officer training, and the Local Rabies Control Authority program. This continued investment in learning enables staff to keep up with current trends in the industry, network with partners, and apply their learning to DAS operations.

To improve internal communication and coordination with staff, DAS has introduced weekly meetings and daily morning briefings. Additionally, there has been a marked increase in focused training on essential topics, including cleaning procedures- now exceeding best practice standards- medication administration, animal handling, disease control, microchip implantation, and animal CPR. Management continues to plan and schedule staff training and development to address needed learning and reinforce new and existing SOPs and skills. This time for training and development is made possible by the implementation of the Wednesday closures to the public which was implemented at the end of February 2024 to address immediate training needs.

Currently, the shelter is closed to the public on Wednesdays and Sundays. Following the 2024 review, management is re-evaluating the shelter's operating hours and the community needs to extend adoption hours into the evenings on several weekdays. This initiative aims to better accommodate community members with traditional work or school schedules. The revised schedule is tentatively set to begin at the end of 2024.

DAS has also strengthened its capacity for care through budget enhancement requests, resulting in the approval of two additional Animal Care Technicians and a Behavior, Enrichment, and Placement Coordinator position, which are currently in the hiring process. Management will continue to assess staffing needs to ensure the shelter's capacity for care is not exceeded and that it can provide adequate support for the shelter population. A comprehensive selection process is currently underway to fill the Shelter Manager position. To ensure a deep candidate pool and selection of a high-quality and experienced candidate, the position was advertised nationally. The selection panels will include animal welfare experts and other industry professionals.

DAS is currently collaborating with the Capital Projects team, architect, and CMAR team on the renovation and expansion plans for the 2023 Bond Program. This initiative aims to address existing facility issues, enhance capacity, and further strengthen DAS operations. To develop the scope of work, DAS staff visited several local shelters, including Operation Kindness, Garland, North Richland Hills, Grand Prairie, Grapevine, and Fort Worth. These visits allowed staff to engage with shelter personnel about building flow, operational processes, and best practices. Utilizing the insights gained, DAS staff worked closely with the capital projects team to create a comprehensive scope of work that meets both programmatic and animal care needs. Currently, the renovation is in the schematic design phase, with construction tentatively scheduled to begin in Spring 2025.

In advance of the upcoming renovation and expansion, management has collaborated with Facilities to prioritize immediate needs identified by staff and stakeholders. To bolster security and enhance control over sensitive shelter areas, traditional physical keys are being replaced with advanced badge readers, providing improved access management and tracking capabilities. Additionally, management is investing in new dog runs for the North yard, which will facilitate easier cleaning and allow for expanded programming while awaiting the full renovation. These runs are designed to be easily movable, allowing for their relocation and utilization during the renovation to support continued operations during construction. Moreover, lighting has been prioritized in the North yard to ensure that employees can work safely and efficiently at all hours. In May 2024, DAS completed an update of the Chapter 6 Animals City Ordinance, addressing deficiencies in the previous ordinance and aligning DAS with current industry standards. Key changes included mandatory microchipping and a reduced hold period to lower animals' length of stay and increase positive outcomes.

Staff has effectively leveraged technology to modernize and enhance operations by replacing outdated paper tracking systems. Notable improvements include the introduction of electronic vet check forms, digital training records retention, a new volunteer management software, and an upgraded email communications platform designed to engage volunteers, fosters, and adopters more efficiently. Additionally, electronic staff scheduling has streamlined internal processes, while the provision of cell phones to officers has eliminated the need for them to return to the shelter for phone communications with reporting parties or the community. Furthermore, data tracking has been improved with the implementation of a performance scorecard dashboard, which transparently publishes shelter data for public access, fostering greater community engagement and accountability.

Management has developed a comprehensive euthanasia policy and incorporated feedback from industry experts, including Shelter Savvy and Best Friends Animal Society to ensure limited, consistent, and humane euthanasia practices are in place, including disallowing euthanasia on days that the shelter is closed. DAS is taking this policy to the Animal Services Advisory Committee for feedback and will bring the euthanasia policy to the Council in January for a work session.

This year, DAS also enhanced its volunteer and foster programs, implementing updated training, increased communication, monthly orientations, on-demand training materials, and a new volunteer management software to streamline scheduling, check-in, and tracking. Through these efforts, since June, DAS has successfully supported nearly 2,000 hours of volunteer help and provided care for almost 500 neonate kittens in its foster program. While substantial progress has been made over the last year to improve department operations, DAS acknowledges much work remains. A management response to concerns and recommendations outlined by the current shelter review conducted by Shelter Savvy is included at the end of the Shelter Savvy report **(Exhibit 5)**.

ATTACHMENTS:

Exhibit 1- 2018 Animal Shelter Services, LLC.-Final Report
Exhibit 2- 2018 Animal Shelter Services, LLC.-Final Findings
Exhibit 3- 2023 Canine Care Investigation
Exhibit 4- 2024 Shelter Savvy Review
Exhibit 5- Shelter Savvy Management Response

Respectfully Submitted:
Nikki Sassenus, Animal Services