



**Madera County Animal Services:
It's A Dog's Life
Madera County Grand Jury
Final Report 2324-03
June 19, 2024**

Summary

Madera County Animal Services (MCAS) has long been a cornerstone of community welfare, providing vital services ranging from animal adoption to public health protection. However, recent investigations by the Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) have shed light on the organization's persistent challenges, spanning over two decades.

The findings of the 2023-2024 MCGJ report highlight three recurring themes: facility shortcomings, understaffing, and the absence of a comprehensive Policy and Procedure manual. Despite years of acknowledgment by the Madera County Board of Supervisors and MCAS directors, these issues still need to be solved, posing significant hurdles to effective operations and community service.

Background

Animal shelter services play an essential role in the community, by adopting out pets to loving homes and helping keep the streets clean and safe from animal-transmitted diseases. The Madera County website lists the following services provided by the Department of Madera County Animal Services (MCAS)

- Protection of public health against contagious, infectious, or communicable animal diseases.
- Rabies Control.
- Patrol of public streets and parks in the County of Madera.
- Adoption of shelter animals after mandated California state time period (3-day hold).
- Impoundment of stray, sick, or injured animals, cats/dogs.
- Vaccinate all impounded shelter animals.
- Welfare checks on possible neglected animals.
- Enforcement of local and state laws.
- Animal Licensing for County residents.
- Quarantine of animals involved in bites to humans.
- 24-hour response to emergency calls.
- Volunteer Opportunities - must be 16 or older with a waiver.
- Community Outreach Presentations (providing education on humane animal care, wildlife concerns, and shelter operations).

The MCAS is the only full-service animal shelter in Madera County. Chowchilla has a small holding facility that offers licensing, vaccinations, and community education. The MCAS houses lost, abandoned, or surrendered animals from within the county and city. Healthy animals are offered for adoption at the Madera shelter facility.

There are five Animal Control Officers (ACOs) that respond to field calls and patrol the county for stray or dangerous animals during MCAS business hours. If an animal needs emergency medical care, it is transported to a contracted veterinary facility in Chowchilla. If the

animal does not require emergency care, they are transported to the MCAS facility. The shelter has five trucks for transportation. Three of the five MCAS trucks have air conditioning in the animal cargo/holding area, and two utilize less effective swamp coolers in the animal cargo/holding area.

Methodology

- Interviewed key shelter personnel.
- Conducted an on-site evaluation.
- Reviewed previous Grand Jury reports and responses ([2004-2005](#), [2005-2006](#), [2006-2007](#), [2009-2010](#), [2013-2014](#), and [2015-2016](#))
- Reviewed the Road 28 Campus Project document and timeline.
- Monitored MCAS's social media presence.
- Examined the MCAS budget.
- Reviewed the MCAS organizational chart.
- Reviewed *Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program* prepared for Madera Animal Shelter by the University of Florida.
- Reviewed MGT Consulting Group report on animal services cost and fee analysis.
- Reviewed the data from [Shelter Animals Count](#)

Discussion

In 2023, MCAS was able to intake 3,644 animals, including cats, dogs, and other animals. The annual operating budget approved by the Board of Supervisors is approximately \$1.9 million. Funding for the shelter is split between the County of Madera and the City of Madera. The County provides approximately 90 percent of the funds, and the City covers the other 10 percent, despite the fact that 60 percent of the animals come from the County and 40 percent come from the City. This was established through a tax-sharing contract between the City and the County. Chowchilla does not contribute financially to MCAS.

The MCGJ has completed investigations into MCAS in 2004-2005, 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2009-2010, 2013-2014, and 2015-2016. Throughout those reports spanning up to twenty years, there have been three recurring topics:

1. Facilities issues and capacity limitations
2. Insufficient personnel
3. There needs to be a policy and procedure manual that includes agency-specific training information for employees and volunteers.

The Board of Supervisors and MCAS directors acknowledge and agree with these concerns year after year. However, all three issues remain.

Facilities issues:

The following are excerpts from past MCGJ reports highlighting the concerns recognized regarding the MCAS facilities:

- 2004-2005: There were crowded conditions. Evidence of lack of cleaning was also noted.
- 2005-2006: Crowded conditions... are just a few problems faced in the operation of the animal shelter.
- 2013-2014: The County Animal Services Facilities need upgrading and repair.
- 2015-2016: The MCAS is old, in disrepair, and inadequate to accommodate the county's needs.

The 2023-2024 MCGJ toured the current MCAS facility and noted concerns over the drab gray facilities and the lack of a welcoming ambiance. Offensive, pungent, and lingering odors greet the public at the entry door to the kennels. These odors raise concerns for the safety of employees, the public, and the animals. The offensive smells in the kennel area may also discourage return visits and potential adoptions. Plumbing in the facility currently still requires frequent repair and maintenance. The location of the facility, hidden behind the County Jail, presents challenges in accessibility and visibility to the public.

Every year, MCAS offers hope for an improved or brand-new shelter facility to help meet the needs of the ever-growing community. In 1984, the Will and Testament of Ms. Roberta J. Wills, a resident of Madera County, requested that the sum of \$268,725.51 be donated to MCAS and half of the money be used for making capital improvements at any existing animal shelter or towards acquisition and construction of a new facility. The other half of the trust money was to be used for operations and maintenance. The 2004-2005, 2005-2006, 2006-2007 MCGJ panels all inquired into the status of the Roberta J. Will trust money allocation to MCAS. The 2009-2010 MCGJ reported that a new building opened in November 2008 that includes an adoption area and a room that houses adoptable animals. During the facility tour in September 2023, the MCGJ saw that the new room designated for pet bonding for potential adopters was being used for storage.

In November 2013, the Board of Supervisors commissioned and incorporated the Road 28 Campus Study into the Madera County Capital Improvement Plan. These plans included new buildings for Madera County Social Services and Public Health, relocation of the Agricultural Commissioner, and a new animal shelter facility for MCAS. The initial plans indicated that the animal shelter was slated in Phase 7 of 8, which was estimated for construction in 2024. An interview with a County administrator indicated that there is no longer any money in this plan for MCAS as of 2023. Funding shortages and bureaucratic hurdles have continuously hindered progress in facility upgrades.

Insufficient Personnel:

The following are excerpts from past MCGJ reports highlighting the concerns recognized regarding staffing issues at MCAS:

- 2004-2005: There is a staff shortage at the Animal Shelter.
- 2005-2006: ...staff shortages... are just a few problems faced in the operation of the animal shelter.
- 2013-2014: The Madera County Animal Services and the City of Madera Animal Control Divisions are understaffed.
- 2015-2016: Every county employee and county representative interviewed during this investigation stated that the department needed... more staff.

According to the Proposed Recommended Budget for 23-24, the Animal Shelter was budgeted for 20 full-time equivalent employees. As of May 2024, 14 positions were filled. MCGJ learned that there is currently a hiring freeze for the remaining positions. The staff comprises one director, an accounting technician, an animal services office supervisor, five field personnel, and other on-site employees. The animal services officers cover the entire County except for the incorporated cities of Chowchilla and Madera. There are also volunteers that offer assistance in caring for the animals and cleaning the facility.

Lack of Policy and Procedure Manual:

The following are excerpts from past MCGJ reports highlighting the concerns recognized regarding the lack of Policy and Procedure Manual:

- 2005-2006: MCGJ recommends MCAS ensure that all animal shelter staff is adequately trained.
- 2009-2010: There needs to be more formal, regularly scheduled training programs for staff.
- 2015-2016: No organized, detailed writing policy/procedure for the orientation of new hires was produced, nor did the present staff know of a formalized orientation program.

Policy and Procedure Manuals are essential tools to direct the operations of any agency or body, ensure state laws are known and followed by all employees, and establish consistent training procedures for all new hires and volunteers. The Board of Supervisors has acknowledged the lack of a Policy and Procedure Manual specific to MCAS, and no formalized department-specific training. In 2016, the MCAS director also acknowledged the MCGJ findings and recommendations by issuing a response stating; I will make a personal commitment to dedicate the time needed to provide an organized, detailed, written policy/procedure manual for both staff and volunteers.

The 2023-2024 MCGJ requested the current Policy and Procedure Manuals several times. MCAS personnel stated these documents would be produced for the MCGJ, however no manuals were ever provided. Later in the investigation, the Board of Supervisors confirmed that MCAS does not have a Policy and Procedure Manual. In addition, all interviewees stated that new employees and volunteers continue to rely on training from other employees. Despite commitments to address these issues, no progress has been made. This raises questions about adherence to state laws and standards and concerns for employees and volunteers who are left without essential guidance and training resources.

The data of the future is alarming.

Every year, MCAS reports data to several entities, one of which is *Shelter Animals Count*, a National centralized database for shelter animals. Their hope is to collect statistics with the intent of allowing organizations to *streamline and pivot operations according to the needs of their community*. The MCGJ reviewed the statistical trends of intakes, adoptions, and euthanasia events over the last several years and discovered a disturbing reality.

Year	Number of intakes	Number of adoptions	Number of animals euthanized	Euthanasia rate
2021	2,226	525	230	10%
2022	2,730	442	617	22%
2023	3,644	530	1,214	33%

Perhaps most alarming is the sharp increase in euthanasia events, with the percentage of animals euthanized nearly tripling from 2021 to 2023. While euthanasia is sometimes necessary for humane reasons, such as severe illness or aggression, the high euthanasia rate raises questions about the capacity of MCAS to provide alternatives and interventions to prevent unnecessary euthanasia.

The largest percentage of intakes consist of stray animals (picked up and brought to MCAS by the ACO team), with a small percentage of intakes consisting of owner-relinquished pets and other intakes. With the population of Madera County continuously growing, it can be assumed that the number of strays, and therefore the number of animals euthanized, will only continue to increase exponentially. Without concerted action, the trajectory of animal welfare in Madera County may continue on a troubling path, with far-reaching implications for both animals and residents.

Findings:

F1: The MCGJ finds that the tax-sharing contract between Madera County and the cities of Madera and Chowchilla should be more equitable based on the number of animal intakes per jurisdiction.

F2: The 2023-2024 MCGJ finds, and agrees with previous findings, that the MCAS facility is inadequate to meet Madera County's current needs and future growth.

F3: The 2023-2024 MCGJ finds, and agrees with previous MCGJ findings, that staffing shortages persist due to the significant gap between the budgeted number of full-time equivalent employees and the actual number of positions filled.

F4: The 2023-2024 MCGJ finds, and agrees with previous MCGJ findings, that the MCAS does not have an established written Policy and Procedure Manual.

Recommendations:

R1: The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors renegotiate the tax-sharing contract between the County of Madera and the cities of Madera and Chowchilla regarding the MCAS funding within 90 days of the MCGJ report posting.

R2: The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors propose a new plan to complete the renovation of the current MCAS facility or the construction of a new facility within 90 days of the MCGJ report posting.

R3: The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors remove the hiring freeze affecting MCAS within 90 days of the posting of the MCGJ report.

R4: The MCGJ recommends that MCAS develop and adopt a written Policy and Procedure Manual within 180 days of the MCGJ report posting.

Required Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the MCGJ requests responses as follows; From the following elected county officials within 90 days:

Madera County Board of Supervisors
200 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Madera City Council
205 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Chowchilla City Council
130 S. 2nd Street
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Invited Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the MCGJ requests responses as follows;
From the following elected county officials within 60 days:

Madera County Animal Shelter
14269 Road 28
Madera, CA 93637

Madera County Public Health Director
1604 Sunrise Avenue
Madera, CA 98368

Madera County Animal Control Director
14269 Road 28
Madera, CA 93636

Madera County Chief Administrative Officer
200 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Note: This report was prepared using current information available on the websites listed.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.
