



**"We Speak For Those Who Cannot Speak For Themselves"**

May 12, 2008

Dennis Finlay  
Town Manager  
Town of Smithfield  
64 Farnum Pike, Smithfield, RI

Dear Mr. Finlay:

Attached are the results of our investigation. You requested that we look into allegations of neglect, cruelty and the general operation of your animal shelter. One section of our report deals with some personnel recommendations. We consider this section confidential. You may release the remainder of our report to whomever you wish.

The investigation consisted of two recent visits to the shelter, a review of our past inspections, interviews with town employees, volunteers, concerned citizens as well as policies, procedures, other shelter records, photos and e-mails.

Our report is intended to be a guide on how the shelter can move forward. It will not address each allegation made. Some of our recommendations will require additional work if they are to be implemented.


Our investigation focused on the past two years.

The situation the town finds themselves in is not unique, it is happening in many other shelters.

If there are any questions or concerns that you would like to discuss please feel free to contact us at any time.

Sincerely,

  
E.J. Finocchio, DVM  
President, RISPCA

  
David Holden  
Director, RISPCA

## **SHELTER BUILDING:**

The Smithfield shelter is an older building with indoor kennels to shelter 19 dogs and 10-12 cats. There are cat cages in the storage area that are used when they have an overflow of cats.

The dog runs have a common design where the dogs can be allowed outside by opening a guillotine door. The cat room has stainless steel cages that are in good condition. The cat room is air-conditioned while the dog kennels are not.

Everyone we spoke to would like a new facility; however, that is not likely to happen. As with any older building, there are always maintenance problems that need to be addressed.

## **FINDINGS/RECOMANDATIONS:**

The Smithfield Animal Shelter physical facility is comparable to many of the other R.I. municipal shelters in that improvements are needed.

Within the last two years, representatives from the RIPSCA made two visits to the Smithfield Animal Shelter. On one of these visits, the RI state veterinarian, Dr. Scott Marshall, accompanied us. The animal area of the shelter was basically clean without any foul odors. It should be noted that on both visits there were less than 5 dogs sheltered in the kennel area. The garage area was less clean and disorderly. There were some minor structural defects inside the shelter that may affect people but would not affect the animals.

If funds can be made available, cleaning and painting the inside of the shelter would be a beginning. The floors would be the first priority. This could be addressed by simply power washing the surface and applying epoxy paint. As for the garage area, installing shelves for storage will allow the area to be better organized. This will also allow for some of the items stored in the kennel area to be moved into the garage area.

Allowing the animals some freedom time on a daily basis in a secured confined indoor or outdoor area would be of great benefit to sheltered animals that are usual experiencing stress. Some animals may be placed together based on the recommendation of the animal control officer in charge.

Drains outside the dog kennels have no covers and this should be addressed to avoid them from being clogged. Dog toys also can block off the drains increasing the possibility of improper drainage of waste.

It would be beneficial to both the animals sheltered and the personal to have one or more exhaust fans installed to improve air quality in the shelter. The shelter should have a washer and dryer installed.

It is our opinion that a shelter that is clean, bright and without unhygienic smells will result in more adoptions and create a better work environment for employees and volunteers.

## **CRUELTY AND NEGLECT:**

Mr. Holden explained to each person interviewed the definition of animal cruelty and neglect as per Rhode Island law. We then asked each person if they had witnessed or had first hand knowledge of any animal in the Smithfield shelter of being hit, kicked, intentionally hurt, deprived of emergency care etc. The majority of past volunteers expressed some concerns about incidents they felt rose to the level of cruelty or neglect. These allegations were backed up with some photos and e-mails. One private citizen observed an ACO literally throw a dog suffering from heat exhaustion into the back of the ACO's vehicle. In contrast, one of the hostile witnesses said she never saw any abuse or neglect during her time at the shelter.

During the interview process neither the ACO's, the volunteers presently allowed in the shelter and the shelter veterinarian, Dr Floyd Graham stated they had *never* observed any incident of cruelty or neglect.

## **FINDINGS/RECOMANDATIONS:**

Based on our interviews with all involved it was difficult to determine if indeed any acts of neglect or cruelty were committed. We did not find any clear-cut evidence of cruelty but felt more care could have been administered. Neglect is more subjective and harder to define. We understand animals need food, water and a clean and safe environment while being sheltered. Food and water bowls are often tipped over and in the majority of times dogs eat their meal as soon as it is offered to them, therefore it is not unusually to visit a shelter and see empty food bowls in the dog kennels. Cats on the other hand if feed free choice will most often always have food present in their bowls.

It is our sincere feeling that all animals were provided with food and water on a daily basis. There was some controversy as to who was feeding the animals and this may have caused a problem. We did not find evidence that the ACO's were not providing basic care to the animals in the shelter. It was quite evident that the quality of care was not acceptable by the volunteers.

The ACO's informed us that they knew what the town's policy was in regard to emergency veterinarian care and stated they followed the policy at all times.

It is not the purpose of this report to dwell or speculate on the alleged incidents. If there were acts of cruelty that did take place at the shelter we feel there would have been some hard evidence such as photos, eyewitness accounts, firsthand knowledge, or medical records, there was none.

Many of the alleged acts of neglect are based on a different set of "standards of care." One group wants and expects much higher standards of care than municipal and some

private shelters provide. Shelters are for short term care of animals, until they are adopted, reunited with their owners or euthanized because of aggression or other valid reasons. Rarely is the level of care in shelters equal to the care provided by an owner or altruistic animal lover. The word euthanasia always raises a red flag and there are those who believe that all should be saved regardless of the circumstances. They do not see the inhumanity in warehousing animals in a shelter with limited funds and personal to deal with these animals. The shelter is operated by the town and paid for by tax dollars. The Town of Smithfield provides emergency care for injured and sick animals. At times euthanasia is the humane and only answer. Records indicate the shelter euthanizes few animals. This is a positive indication that the shelter is being operated in a humane way.

# **SHELTER OPERATIONS/SUPERVISION**

Most of the past and present volunteers stated they had never seen a copy of the shelters "Operational Guidelines." The town provided a memo with a list of volunteers signatures stating they have "received, read and understood" the guidelines. In comparing statements from volunteers, some names did not appear on the document that was proved to us.

Many of the past volunteers told us that many of the cage cards with the animal's information on them were missing or not filled out properly. They stated some animals were adopted out to people they felt should not have them.

It was quite evident from interviewing the volunteers that there was a complete breakdown in communication and there was no direction or protocol to follow when they volunteered their time. Most of the past volunteers stated they sometimes did not know what they could and could not do and that it depended on which ACO was on duty. There appeared to be two different mindsets in regard to how the volunteers were treated and instructed. Most of the present volunteers had certain tasks that they always preformed.

It was the general consensus that most of the volunteers that were dismissed would not go back as volunteers because of the appalling experiences they alleged to have encountered. Others chose to volunteer at other shelters. Some of the volunteers stated they would continue to volunteer in a capacity that would not involve being in the shelter such as transporting animals for treatment or providing funds for veterinarian care.

Both ACO's indicated that they appreciated the efforts of the present volunteers and that they are an asset to the shelter and hope they continue to volunteer. Asked if they would welcome back those volunteers who left for whatever reason, they expressed mixed feelings; one ACO felt none should be allowed back while the other felt they could if they followed policies and protocol.

Both ACO's agreed that the volunteer program; especially the past program was disorganized. They agreed that some of the past volunteers "took over" and were allowed to do things the ACO's did not want them to do. At times one ACO would stop the volunteers from doing certain things. One ACO was very candid and told us he should have taken a more active role in the volunteer program and stated he did not enforce operating policy as he should have. Admitting he was negligent and not performing his duties as he should have been not easy for him. He felt it was easier to get along and let some things slide rather than confront the volunteers and possibly create a problem. We were impressed by this ACO's sincerity and willingness to do a better job with the volunteers. We felt he was deeply concerned about the situation and hoped it would get better before it got worse.

The former volunteers told us unanimously that they liked and had a good working relationship with one ACO and that they had the opposite feeling about the other ACO.

During the interviews, we were impressed with Dep.Chief St.Sauveur professionalism and willingness to be involved in the animal shelter that is often a lightning rod for controversy.

Dep. Chief St.Sauveur had contacted the RISPCA in the past years requesting training for both ACO's and advice on improving the shelter. We cannot recall any police officer wanting to become so involved in trying to improve their animals control operations.

## **FINDINGS/RECOMANDATIONS:**

Both ACO's had a good understand and knowledge of what they were required to do under the operating guidelines, however, they did not always follow them. This was a major problem with the past volunteers.

Both ACO's told us they had the proper equipment and vehicles to do their job. They also knew they had the support of the police department and that their supervisor was Dep. Chief St.Sauveur

The RISPCA provides some training for ACO's throughout the state. Smithfield ACO's have attended several of our trainings. They have also requested, thought Deputy Chief St.Sauveur, additional instruction on temperament testing and dangerous dog handling. The RISPCA did provide this additional training. In addition to the hands on training, they were provided with several training manuals on animal topics and a list of additional materials on shelter operations. This indicates their willingness to increase their knowledge on animal issues. The request for further training in our opinion came about as a result of potential problems with volunteers at the shelter.

The past volunteers made it quite evident to us that they did not have a lucid understanding of how the shelter operated and what they could and could not do. This also applied to some of the present volunteers.

There was an almost complete breakdown in direction and communication between the shelter staff and the volunteers. This evidently further strained the relationship and in some cases the situation was on the brink of becoming verbally hostile.

The personnel issue will be addressed in a separate memo and should not be made public without the ACO's permission. This memo will offer some suggestions. We did not find any personal problems that could not be remedied through training and more supervision.

## **FINAL RECOMANDATIONS:**

We would like to thank everyone that took time to talk with us. We spoke to people on both side of this issue. To us, this shows that the Town of Smithfield employees, volunteers and citizens are concerned enough to give up their time in hopes of improving the present situation at the shelter.

We did not find any tangible evidence that any animals at the shelter were deprived of emergency care. The General Order's covering shelter operation is excellent, easy to read and comprehensive. The section on volunteers covers how the volunteer program is to be administered. The problem was either side did not follow it.

The volunteers, past and present have demonstrated remarkable dedication to helping the lives of animals at the shelter. It was apparent to us that the volunteers have been a wonderful resource and have provided many hours of labor both in and out of the shelter. The volunteers, simply put, were nice people; they were more down to earth than other groups we have dealt with. Volunteers are very compassionate and giving individuals and often times do not see the whole picture because they are not always present. Their expectations many times exceed the standard of care provided to shelter animals creating the potential for a problem.

The bottom line is the Town of Smithfield is ultimately responsible for the running of their shelter. It would be beneficial if town officials took more of an interest in the shelter and made frequent visits. We found that the past volunteers usurped much of that authority. A volunteer group can be a valuable asset to the operation of any shelter if properly administered.

We suggest all volunteers now at the shelter and future volunteers be given a copy of the General Order covering shelter operations, reference section XVIII and that they attend a volunteer orientation session. This will eliminate any questions about procedure and protocol and the duties of a volunteer. All volunteers are to sign a document indicating they fully understand the role of a volunteer at the shelter, that they have read the General Order and have completed the volunteer orientation program. The Smithfield shelter deals with many stray animals with unknown medical histories. Of major concern is the possible exposure of rabid animals to volunteers. The town would be held responsible should an unfortunate incident occur involving a suspect animal and a volunteer, therefore no volunteer should be allowed to interact with any animal that does not have a current rabies vaccination. All volunteers should also sign a document releasing he town of any liability in regard to injury. It was indicated to us that none of the past volunteers wanted to return to the shelter. It was our feeling from interviewing both sides there remains some deep-seated feelings that may not vanish and could be potentially troublesome should any of them wish to return. We feel that should any of them change their minds they should not be allowed back in without everyone having a clear understanding of how the shelter operates, and what the volunteer role is.

The ACO supervisor should be responsible for the volunteer program. He must take a much more active role in the administration of this program to avoid future problems.


Municipalities vary in how they supervise their shelters. Some have a sub-committee of their town councils, most have a police officer. Deputy Chief St. Sauveur is now their direct supervisor. We feel there should be another level between the ACO's and the Deputy Chief. A patrol officer, sergeant, or lieutenant working the day shift may work. It would allow the same person to respond to calls when they are working, stop at the shelter often and ensure shelter operation guidelines are being followed.


The cosmetics of the shelter need to be greatly improved. Based on the number of animals handled by the shelter on a yearly basis and the budget allocated to run the shelter, we feel the town needs to address the feasibility of maintaining a town shelter.

There were some suggestions that a five-person oversight committee be formed. The committee would include the town manager, members of the council an ACO and a citizen. We do not know of any of shelter that has this type of supervision. It may be worthwhile for long term planning but in day-to-day operations, we feel it is too cumbersome.

In conclusion, we feel both sides have some valid concerns that need to be addressed. We firmly believe in the volunteer program and the many benefits derived from volunteers. No program will run efficiently without rules, regulations, leadership, and a precise understanding of the limitations that may exist. More training of all ACO's is imperative, especially in dealing with the concerns of citizens in their town pertaining to animal issues. The image of today's ACO's needs to be improved and that will only come with more qualified and trained individuals who have a sincere concern for animal welfare.

Sincerely,

  
E. Finocchio, DVM  
President, RISPCA

  
David Holden  
Director, RISPCA

Below is a list of several publication and web sources that we use. .

Publications:

“Animal Control Management” ICMA Management Association [icma.org](http://icma.org)

“National Animal Control Association” National Animal Control Association

Web sites:

ASPCA- wonderful recourse, they also have a packet of information sheets covering many topics that they allow you to copy and hand out.

HSUS-Humane Society of the United States

AHA-American Humane Association

Each of these web sites offer publication on many animal issues and topics.