

Date: May 14, 2021

To: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager 

From: Brent Dennis, Director of Parks, Recreation and Marine 

For: Mayor and Members of the City Council

Subject: **Update on Commitment to Adopt Policy**

At its April 21, 2020 meeting, the City Council requested the City Manager to work with the Animal Care Services Bureau (LBACS) in the Parks, Recreation and Marine Department (Department) to implement a "Commitment to Adopt Policy" to provide a streamlined and equitable approach for placing animals into forever homes.

Background

When LBACS opened its doors in 2001 at the newly constructed P.D. Pitchford Companion Animal Village and Education Center alongside spcaLA, it was widely accepted that spcaLA would find loving homes for all highly adoptable animals at LBACS. The remaining animals at LBACS were considered, at the time, unwanted or dangerous and were therefore euthanized if another animal rescue organization would not accept them into their adoption programs. This model was considered the best practice at the time because it gave healthy and friendly animals a chance to survive their shelter experience; something they did not have before.

A great deal has changed in animal welfare and animal medicine over the last two decades, including the definitions of what animals are considered "highly adoptable," "unwanted," and "dangerous." Pets are now widely regarded as members of our families, seen for their unique personalities, needs, and experiences. The desire to help animals who are suffering from physical and emotional distress has overwhelmed our society's desire to have the most perfect pets. Newer generations no longer seek out only animals considered "highly adoptable" and are now open to sharing their lives and love with those in most need.

LBACS Begins Conducting Adoptions

In 2010, LBACS implemented an adoption program of its own to place animals who may not have been considered "highly adoptable," but who were nonetheless deserving of a chance at a life and a family. LBACS continued the practice of allowing spcaLA to have the first opportunity to take animals from LBACS who were not reclaimed by their owners, prior to animals being available for adoption at LBACS. This practice raised concerns in the community for several reasons:

1. Community members were not able to adopt the pets they wanted directly from LBACS, even though those pets originated from LBACS. Instead, they would have to adopt from another organization, at a higher adoption fee.

2. The LBACS adoption process is often less restrictive than other organizations, causing a potential adopter to be denied adoption at another organization. If the pet had remained at LBACS, the potential adopter would have likely been allowed to adopt the pet.
3. As a government agency, LBACS statistical data related to animals is a matter of public record and can be reviewed by anyone who requests it. In addition, LBACS is required to allow 501c3 animal adoption organizations to take animals prior to their euthanasia date. Private nonprofit organizations do not have these same legal requirements. Animals transferred from LBACS to other organizations have been euthanized by those organizations, without the knowledge of LBACS and without the requirement government agencies have to provide transparent data about outcomes for animals and the requirement to give animals to nonprofit 501c3 organizations prior to the animal's euthanasia.

In 2019, this practice of allowing spcaLA to take all animals before members of the public had a chance to adopt was reviewed by the newly hired Animal Services Director. It was clear that LBACS' reliance on another agency to take the majority of animals from the shelter placed it at a great disadvantage, should that agency unilaterally decide to no longer take animals from LBACS. This was the case beginning in August 2019, when spcaLA raised concerns over the management of animals in the shelter, in particular the use of isolation to manage incidences of a viral contagion in the shelter, instead of euthanasia of healthy but potentially infected, animals that could pose a potential safety risk to another organization's population. Once the contagious threat passed, spcaLA resumed taking animals from LBACS. However, this required LBACS to increase adoption efforts independently of, and without regard to, any unofficial arrangements made between past LBACS management and spcaLA.

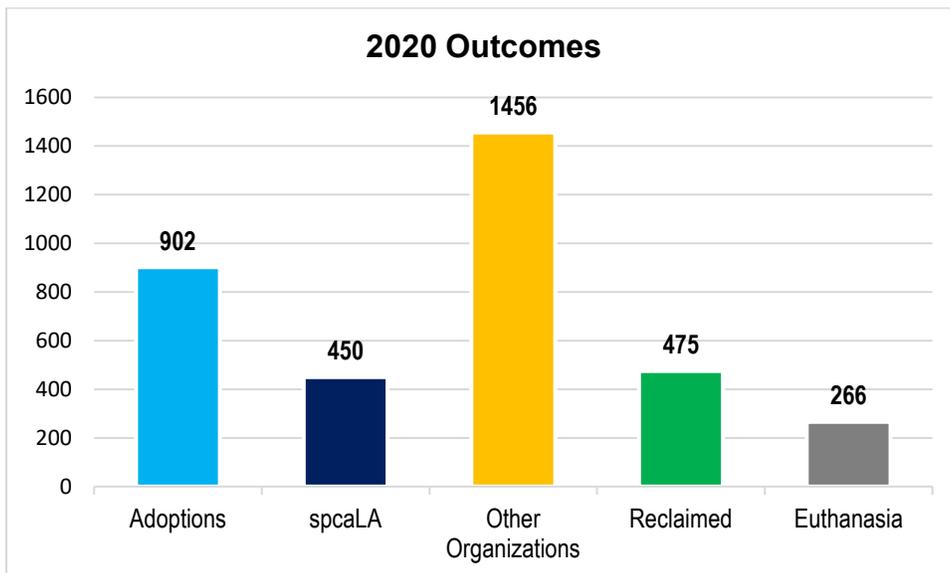
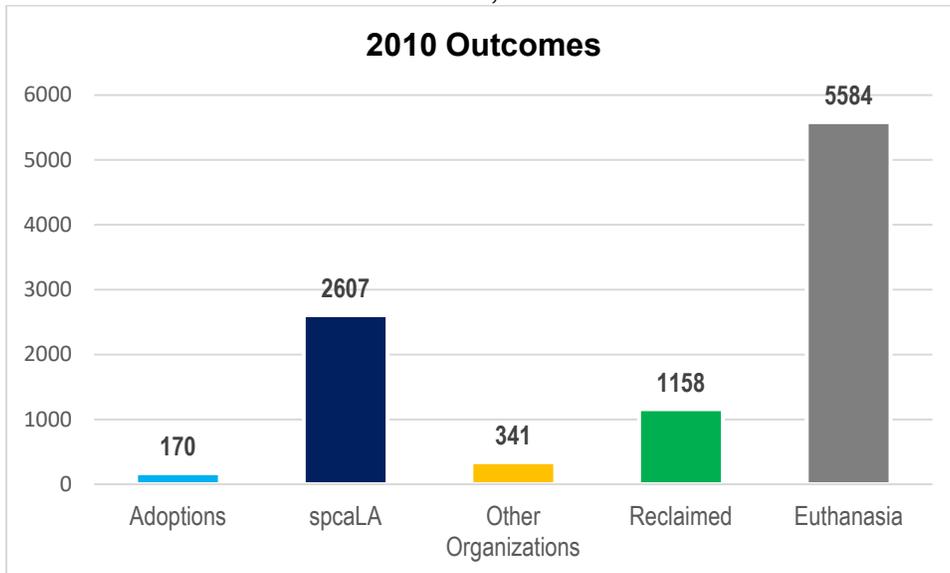
COVID-19 Impact on Adoption

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused animal shelters across the nation to modify operations almost overnight. The primary concern was transmission of COVID-19 between people. Limiting cross contamination and the potential spread of the disease became paramount. This meant reducing and limiting human interactions at the shelter as much as possible, which presented a real barrier to adoption. With the tremendous support of Live Love Animal Rescue and Little Lion Foundation, LBACS was able to send animals into the foster care systems of these organizations as an immediate response to the pandemic. Within days, the animal shelter was nearly empty. It was at this time that spcaLA notified LBACS that it would suspend adoptions and close the adoption center and would no longer transfer animals from LBACS. However, adoption and rescue continued to be the outcomes driving lifesaving at LBACS.

It was decided that adoptions would continue at LBACS by appointment, and that members of the public could make a "Commitment to Adopt" a pet during the pet's stray holding period. LBACS determined the adoption schedule and began recording requests from interested adopters and scheduling appointments for them to visit animals. To make this process more efficient, LBACS partnered with an online platform in May 2020 called Adopets to enable

community members to conduct most of the adoption process online. In addition, it was decided that direct adoption outcomes would be honored prior to any rescue placement. However, if no member of the public had made a commitment to adopt a pet in LBACS care (usually by the end of the mandatory holding period), then the pet would be available to other organizations to take into their adoption programs.

LBACS Outcomes, 2010 and¹ 2020



¹ Registered transfer partners was 9 in 2010, as opposed to over 60 registered transfer partners in 2020

More Opportunities for Transfer Partner Clarity

As LBACS adoption program began to flourish, other aspects of LBACS animal placement programming required more clarity, especially concerning the expectation regarding the placement of animals taken by LBACS transfer partners (aka rescue partners).

In October 2020, LBACS reached out to all registered transfer partners to begin a discussion about transferring animals from LBACS, with adoption from their organizations being the primary goal. We let our partners know that the expectation was that a transfer should result in a life saved, and that a transfer partner should not euthanize treatable animals transferred from LBACS without first giving LBACS the opportunity to take the animal back. With only one exception, which has since been mitigated, LBACS transfer partners unanimously agreed to this expectation. LBACS is working with transfer partners to establish a written agreement that reflects this expectation, along with other program expectations regarding transfers from LBACS.

LBACS Current Adoption Process

Today, LBACS accepts adoption applications for nearly all stray and surrendered animals in its care, while the animal awaits reunion with their owner. Potential adopters can meet with most animals prior to the expiration of the holding period and make a “Commitment to Adopt” when the holding period expires. This enables animals to be placed at the time the holding period expires and greatly reduces the length of stay for animals (32 days on average for each animal adopted in 2020, down from 49 days on average for each animal adopted in 2018). All animals who are no longer on a required holding period and not yet reunited with their owners, or who do not have an adopter, are available to all transfer partners. Healthy and treatable stray animals are welcome to stay in the care of the shelter until they are adopted or transferred to a partner who will guarantee placement of the animal. We continue to work closely with transfer partners and the community to find placement for treatable animals. Animals who are not treatable or who pose a serious safety risk to public safety are euthanized when placement cannot be responsibly made.

The current established process for pet adoptions at LBACS is as follows:

1. Interested parties must apply for adoption to LBACS. This may be done by submitting a signed application in person by appointment, online (i.e., Adopets), or by email (petadopt@longbeach.gov). Applications are reviewed by LBACS on a first-come, first-served basis. Approved applicants are considered Potential Adopters (PAs).
2. Prior to the expiration of the holding period, a PA may meet with an animal and request to adopt an animal on the day it becomes available. An adoption hold, otherwise known as a Commitment to Adopt (CTA) will be placed on the animal for the PA. The CTA enables LBACS to process all adoption applications on a first-come, first-served basis but it will never obligate a PA to finalize the adoption.

3. PAs may adopt an animal after LBACS has met the required holding period set by local and/or State law². Holding periods vary depending on the animal type, age, health, and facts related to how the animal came into LBACS' care.
4. LBACS will provide counseling to PAs regarding specific care required for the animal including:
 - The circumstances of the animal's admittance to the shelter.
 - Observations of the animal's behavior and what it may indicate for the animal's transition into a new home.
 - Information provided to the shelter from previous owners or caretakers of the animal prior to the animal's admittance to the shelter.
 - Any known medical conditions and treatments performed at the shelter.
 - Pet owner responsibilities (food, water, shelter, exercise, ongoing vet care, humane treatment, licensing, safe confinement, leash law, etc.).
 - Answers to common questions such as:
 - How to transition a new pet from the shelter to the home
 - Diet changes and eating habits
 - URI/Kennel Cough (FIV/FeLV for cat adoptions)
 - Introducing others (cats, dogs, kids)
 - How to handle normal, though unwanted, behavior including house soiling, developmental and/or destructive behavior, and defensive behavior

As LBACS implements and revises its strategic plan, the adoption program will continue to develop to include post adoption follow up as well as behavior and training support to adopters. If you have any questions, please contact me at (562) 570-3172.

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DEPARTMENT HEADS

² Impoundment – Disposal LBMC Title 6 Animals (2012) <
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