

Summary of Notes from Commissioner Meieran Meeting with MCAS Volunteers 9-25-24

— CONFIDENTIAL DRAFT —

I met with a group of MCAS volunteers on September 25, 2024. All of the volunteers work on the front line directly with animals at the shelter, and they report that the conditions at MCAS have gotten worse despite years of increasing funds, hiring of consultants, hiring new manager-level staff, issuing thousands of words, and making over a hundred recommendations in a “strategic plan” that is neither strategic nor a plan.

They’ve tried to express their concerns through the appropriate chain of command but feel that nothing has happened, except volunteers who have shared their concerns and perspective have been dismissed. They reached out to me because the standards were so bad they felt they needed to speak out but didn’t know where else to turn.

The volunteers expressed that this is about more than just isolated instances of substandard animal care or poor treatment of a couple of volunteers. Their concerns go to overarching governance at MCAS. Animal and human lives are being harmed and animal lives are at stake.

The volunteers saw a disconnect when they watched the County board meeting 9/24 where the MCAS Director briefed the Board on the status of a potential new animal shelter. They felt that the situation was being portrayed as if the problems with animal care were due to the building, as if a new facility would make everything better. While they acknowledge the facility is terrible, they wanted to make very clear that the crisis at MCAS is not about the building. It is about the deterioration in conditions directly tied to leadership.

As conditions for the animals have worsened, County and MCAS leadership have held meetings, hired consultants, checked boxes, spent increasing amounts of money and issued press releases as if things were improving on the ground. Meanwhile, they have silenced the voices of anyone speaking to a different narrative.

The volunteers live in fear of being dismissed every day and the only thing that keeps them showing up is knowing that the animals need them. They spoke to some of this, including heart-wrenching examples, at the Board meeting 10/3/24. I am providing this Summary so the volunteers’ collective voice can be memorialized and so their concerns can be considered and addressed by the Board.

I hope that in addition to delving deeply into the concerns raised by the volunteers, shining a light on these issues will prevent further dismissal of volunteers and identify a path for reinstating those who have already been terminated (assuming they are willing to come back).

Key Takeaways as described by the volunteers:

1. The quality of healthcare for animals has decreased substantially.
2. Safety standards are insufficient, erratic, unevenly applied, and communicated poorly, resulting in risk of harm to humans and animals alike.
3. Funds are misused, mysteriously spent, or not spent at all.
4. Standards for adoption and euthanasia have completely unraveled.
5. Everything is cloaked in “aggressive secrecy” and there is a culture of fear at the shelter, even as staffing levels and morale are already at a low.
6. The environment for volunteers is worsening every day and volunteers are being dismissed at an increasing rate.
7. Governance is the issue, not front line staff!

Note from Sharon: The following section is included in this confidential draft so I can make sure I reflect back the concerns that were raised. Please correct anything I got wrong or eliminate or change any wording as you see fit! I will remove this section in the final version.

8. There are individuals in leadership roles who are not qualified for their positions and are causing harm.

Volunteer Coordinator - many concerns.

- a. Background - she had been an animal tech. She had no experience as a volunteer coordinator or similar role. There is consensus she is not qualified for the position.
- b. Initially she came in and did a few helpful things. For example, putting in a wastebasket that volunteers had been asking for for a long time. People thought she seemed decent and was trying to be helpful. However, over time volunteers' perspectives have changed. They have observed her to be extremely controlling, and they have experienced her saying one thing to them and then doing another. In particular, she regularly tells volunteers they can trust her and talk to her, that they can reach out “any time they want.” But it has ended up being in a way that extracts information that she can then use against them or others. They say that “even the people who originally thought she was decent are changing their tune.”
- c. She regularly badmouths the dogs - calling some of them “monsters”, saying about others “they need the crap beat out of them” and similar highly offensive, inappropriate and unprofessional comments.

- d. Example: For “Volunteer Appreciation Week” she purchased a bunch of chatchkes that were not helpful to people or animals. She became offended and seemed to hold a grudge when volunteers conveyed that they would have preferred that the money spent on trinkets was invested in the animals. They did not realize she had purchased the chatchkes with her own money.
 - e. Example: Tara bought a board that was not useful for the purpose of the dog volunteers to replace a board that had been old but functional. She was upset that the volunteers did not seem to appreciate the replacement board, and when they inserted information that was useful onto the board she erased it.
 - f. ***“She needs to go. MCAS needs to hire someone who has actual volunteer management experience and actually cares about the animals.”***
9. MCAS Director is a good person but she is not qualified to be in the position of MCAS Director. She has demonstrated this in serving in the role for over three years with Animal Services receiving more funding but worsening under her leadership.
- a. She has told front line staff that they have to allow the adoption of any animal to any person and to not allow this would constitute discrimination. But that is blatantly untrue and has caused harm (see below).
 - b. She has made employees and volunteers afraid to speak up when they see harm to animal health or safety.
 - c. Standards for adoption and euthanasia completely eroded under her leadership.
 - d. She communicates poorly with volunteers. For example, after the situation where an employee was mauled by a dog with multiple staff members and volunteers witnessing the event, being traumatized, Erin did not follow up with any kind of communication. This could have been an opportunity to reach out and reassure staff, say something simple like “You likely know about the incident, I want to reassure you that we are reevaluating our safety protocols and doing everything in our power to ensure the safety of our workforce and animals in our care.” But there was simply radio silence, leaving people feeling unsupported, traumatized and insecure.

Expanding on the concerns raised by volunteers:

1. The quality of healthcare for the animals has decreased substantially

Sick animals are not being treated when they are obviously ill, including blood in their urine and coughing that progresses to respiratory distress and pneumonia. The volunteers see the reality because they are with the animals all the time. They try to get

help and are dismissed (literally and figuratively). There is an unprecedented number of sick animals in the kennels and their issues are not being addressed. In fact they are often adopted out even when sick.

- There is a clipboard on the wall where volunteers are supposed to write about health concerns they have for animals. In the past, items were at least checked off. Now there isn't even an attempt to appear to check the clipboard. But the pages are out of date, most entries remain unchecked, except for occasionally someone will write "Thanks". Nothing seems to translate into actual care for sick animals.
- Medications are not directly administered to the animals but wrapped in a food the dogs like and then tossed into the kennels. Volunteers report finding multiple tablets on kennel floors every day. One volunteer reports having written multiple emails about this to management, only to repeatedly receive the same message: "Thanks for letting us know, please let us know if the practice continues."

Sick animals are being adopted out as a matter of course, causing significant harm. This is described in more detail below.

2. **Standards for adoption and euthanasia have completely unraveled**

Volunteers feel that MCAS used to have some standards, even if the volunteers didn't necessarily agree with them. Now it seems there are no standards at all.

- a. Dangerous or sick dogs are adopted out, sometimes causing harm and costing thousands of dollars, while dogs that are not dangerous or have a treatable condition are euthanized.

Example: On the MCAS website, a scathing review reported on a dog that was adopted out, extremely sick, taken to the ER and had severe pneumonia, costing thousands of dollars. The vet said this was the sickest dog they had ever seen adopted out.

Example: A dog had vision problems. A rescue organization said they couldn't take the dog that week but could the following week. The dog was euthanized for "lack of resources". Even though the dog could have been rescued the following week, and Dolly's Fund had funds that could have been used for the dog.

- b. Bites are not always an indicator of a violent dog. In the past, if there was a "ghost bite" incident, volunteers knew there would be an assessment of the reported incident and decisions about euthanasia would at least involve

consideration of the circumstances. Many animals placed on “bite quarantine” were subsequently assessed and were deemed okay.

“Now we don’t even ask. If an animal is placed on bite quarantine, we know they’re dead.” Any report of any type of biting leads to euthanasia without any further assessment.

- c. In terms of adoption, volunteers have observed that front line staff feel they must allow adoption of any dog to any person requesting it. They’ve seen employees being told by management that they can’t say “no” to any potential adoption because to do so would constitute “discrimination”. The volunteers say that this is untrue, and the Director’s adherence to this unsubstantiated requirement has caused substantial harm to animals and potential adopters.

Example: A family with two small children wanted to adopt a dog that a volunteer had expressed concerns about in terms of safety, particularly with small children. The parents were to return with the two children for the adoption. The day after their visit the dog mauled an employee. EMS was called and responders found the employee on the floor “with their arm in the dog’s mouth” with additional injuries to the arms, leg and torso. The employee was taken by ambulance to the ER, where they had stitches and other treatment.

Example: Dogs regularly adopted out that are both intact (not spayed/neutered) and sick. One dog that was intact, young, afraid, with no rabies vaccination, was recently adopted by an individual who was homeless in a situation that would clearly cause harm to the animal.

Example: A man came in wanting to adopt a dog. Was told that it wasn’t spayed or neutered. He said that he knew how to neuter dogs - he’d done it before, by wrapping string around the testicles and tightening until the testicles died. A volunteer did not want to adopt the dog to the individual. The MCAS Director told the volunteer they had to let the man adopt the dog.

- d. There is no consistent spay/neuter policy. Dogs are regularly and inappropriately transferred to small rescue agencies when they are intact, transferring the cost of spaying and neutering to the small agency that has no resources.

3. **There is a toxic environment for volunteers that is worsening every day**

One volunteer said that each time they pull into the shelter to do a shift they feel what can only be described as “dread”. The other volunteers emphatically agreed. They have

to sit and gather themselves before walking into the shelter and the only thing that gets them through the door is thinking about the animals.

They report unprecedented levels of firing of volunteers. In the past, volunteers were never fired. A few months ago two longstanding volunteers were fired (one had worked with MCAS for almost two decades, the other multiple years). Two more were fired in the past month. And the rate of dismissal has been increasing.

Volunteers appear to be fired when they speak up for the health and safety of animals or people, when they describe conditions they feel should change, or when they say anything that management feels disagrees with the narrative they're trying to portray. Volunteers live in fear of retaliation. They feel that if they even open their mouth they will be fired. And the way volunteers have been fired has been traumatizing, hurtful and disrespectful.

Volunteers who have dedicated years to helping dogs - in one case almost two decades - have been dismissed in the rudest, most disrespectful and most traumatizing way possible.

- One person had volunteered at Multnomah County for years. One day there was a vacant shift and management asked for people to help out. The volunteer came in and worked the three hour shift. At the end, they were called into the MCAS Director's office, where they were confronted with the Director, the volunteer coordinator, and another staff person and told they were being dismissed and banned from MCAS. "It was like facing a firing squad."

What purportedly led to this vicious dismissal: The volunteer had been fostering a dog and was told there was someone else who wanted to foster it and she expressed that she didn't feel comfortable with the foster. She was told to take it to a Rescue, where she asked if she could continue to foster the dog instead, as she already had a relationship with the dog, it would be less disruptive to the dog. She was advised that this didn't follow the rules of the Volunteer Handbook. She was forced to give up the dog and was fired.

- Another person had volunteered with MCAS for years. At one point they noticed a note on a kennel that said a dog was "really shy". The dog had been there for 16 days. The dog was scheduled to be fostered. The volunteer saw that the animal was very sick and asked Animal Health to evaluate the dog. They didn't do a full evaluation and simply put the dog on medication for kennel cough. The volunteer insisted that something was very wrong and the dog shouldn't go to foster but the volunteer was told to transfer the dog. The dog got much sicker after it was fostered, becoming lethargic. The fosterer took the dog to the Multnomah County vet who said the dog was okay. The volunteer happened to know a retired vet and connected the fosterer to the retired vet just to have

another perspective and support. The retired vet saw the dog and immediately diagnosed pneumonia and said the dog should go to the ER (where pneumonia was confirmed and the dog was finally treated). The volunteer was fired.

4. **Funds are misused, mysteriously spent, or not spent at all**

It's impossible to follow the money at MCAS and taxpayer funds do not seem to be spent effectively. As spending has increased, services have worsened. Volunteers expressed that if they were handed \$60 million for a new shelter they would not entrust it to the MCAS Director, even knowing how desperately a new shelter was needed, because they did not feel she was qualified to lead an endeavor of this magnitude, observing how she has led MCAS.

Volunteers believe that donations dedicated to particular funds have been used inappropriately and not for their intended purpose. The rules require that, in the case of donations made to particular funds, the donations must be used for their intended purpose. The MCAS Director can reportedly change the terms for use of future funds, but is not allowed to change the terms retroactively. The rules have been reportedly misapplied and supposedly dedicated funds have been used for general operations. Dolly's Fund and the Outreach Fund are examples.

- Dolly's Fund "supports care for abandoned animals in need of medical treatment." Volunteers have observed animals that could have been treated for illnesses euthanized because the County could not afford relatively straightforward treatment. Meanwhile, they have witnessed very sick animals being adopted out, causing emotional distress for the adopter, along with costing sometimes hundreds to thousands of dollars in veterinary care that should not have been borne by the adopter.
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- Outreach Fund - \$137,000 was reportedly used from this fund to pay the salary of a "Social Media Director". This person had been on staff and been paid by the County for years, so it's unclear why, when general funding for MCAS has been increasing significantly every year, the County would need to suddenly use money from a dedicated fund to pay the salary. Furthermore, the person doesn't actually do the outreach work anticipated by the fund.
 - An article called out the misuse of funds and a County spokesperson said that the funds had to be used for the salary, otherwise the position would have needed to be eliminated. But the spokesperson didn't answer the question of why this was the case, given that MCAS had been paying for the position for years without using dedicated funds and their general revenue had only increased.

Year after year funding has increased to MCAS as front line staff disappear, managers have been hired who are not necessary, along with “helpers” who get paid \$17-18/hour. Volunteers have observed the helpers doing the bulk of the managerial work while it’s often unclear what the managers are actually accomplishing.

5. **Safety standards are insufficient, erratic, unevenly applied, and communicated poorly, resulting in risk of harm to humans and animals alike**

Speaking up about a safety concern was the reason one volunteer was fired. This Summary contains numerous examples.

6. **Everything is cloaked in “aggressive secrecy” and it’s impossible to get information**

It’s possible to obtain some information through public records, but this is expensive and it feels like the process seems more designed to hide public information than release it. Every excuse seems to be used to avoid sharing information.

7. **Management is the issue, NOT front line staff**

Volunteers voice tremendous support for the front line staff - techs, people who take dogs to play group, etc. Front line staff are treated poorly, are stressed and overworked but are in fear of speaking out and are suffering. One tech was fired three weeks before their probation period ended. Another was fired six months into probation.

The volunteers report having very good relationships with front line staff. They emphasize that management is the source of poor policies and a culture of fear causing harm to both animals and humans.