



2025-2026 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury

# **San José Animal Care Center: The need to strengthen transparency, performance, and trust**

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May 27, 2026

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## SUMMARY

The San José Animal Care Center (shelter) has been the subject of longstanding community concerns, two independent reviews, and sustained public criticism. Among others, these concerns and criticisms focus on the quality of animal care, medical treatment, shelter operations, data accuracy, and the outcomes for animals in the shelter's custody.

The City of San José (City) division that operates the shelter, San José Animal Care & Services (SJACS), has made progress, particularly addressing the 39 recommendations of a 2024 City audit (Office of the City Auditor, 2024).

However, the 2025–26 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury (Civil Grand Jury) finds that critical challenges remain in operations and in the significant erosion of public trust, both of which continue to undermine the shelter's effectiveness.

There is a gap between how SJACS leaders characterize progress at the shelter and how some rescue organizations, volunteers, and animal advocates perceive current conditions. Although SJACS reports improvements, such as increased adoptions and reduced overcrowding, these claims are not fully accepted by portions of the public. Conflicting interpretations of shelter data, negative trends in some shelter results, ongoing reports of troubling incidents, and animal deaths have contributed to a lack of confidence in the shelter's operations.

The Civil Grand Jury finds that lack of data transparency and credibility are key drivers of this trust gap. Historical inconsistencies in the shelter's data collection, changes in reporting methodologies, and insufficient explanations of performance trends have prevented the public from assessing whether conditions are improving. While SJACS has taken steps to strengthen its data reporting, those recent efforts have not been translated into clear, accessible, and trusted public reporting. As a result, even legitimate progress is undermined and often dismissed.

While adoptions have increased and overcrowding has been reduced, other key outcomes have not improved. Transfers to rescue organizations have declined significantly, animals are staying longer in the shelter than they did in fiscal year 2021-2022, and animal deaths have increased.

To address these issues, the Civil Grand Jury recommends that SJACS and the City:

- Establish a formal community advisory group and conduct a public needs assessment to align services with community expectations;
- Ensure the shelter's data is accurate, clearly explained, and easily accessible, including public reporting of shelter capacity and number of animals turned away;
- Explain operational decisions, challenges, and trade-offs;

- Rebuild and expand partnerships with rescue and foster organizations;
- Expand public access to spay and neuter services to reduce a key driver of shelter intake;
- Immediately correct improper ventilation in quarantine areas.

Rebuilding trust will require a fundamental shift in how SJACS engages with the community. The shelter must treat all community members, including its most vocal critics, as essential partners in improving care for animals and the shelter's key outcomes. Trust cannot be restored through internal reforms alone; it must be earned through transparency, responsiveness, and sustained, meaningful engagement.

## BACKGROUND

SJACS operates the public animal shelter at 2750 Monterey Road, providing animal control, licensing, adoptions, vaccinations, medical care, spay and neuter services, support for feral cat colonies, and limited owner-requested euthanasia. The shelter provides humane care and works to improve outcomes for animals. It also supports public health and safety by treating and placing stray, lost, surrendered, and injured animals through adoption, foster care, or transfer to rescue partners.

In addition to serving San José, SJACS provides shelter and animal control services to the cities of Cupertino, Milpitas, and Saratoga.

While SJACS primarily serves dogs and cats, it also cares for small companion animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs, domestic birds, and various exotic pets.

SJACS is part of the City's Department of Public Works and has four units: administration, field operations, medical services, and shelter operations. This structure reflects the range of services required to operate the shelter. The responsibilities of each unit are generally summarized below:

- Administration: Customer service, licensing, finance, and management functions supporting overall operations;
- Field Operations: Animal control officers and dispatch staff responding to calls for service and enforcing animal-related ordinances;
- Medical Operations: Veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and assistants providing treatment and performing spay/neuter surgeries;
- Shelter Operations: Animal care attendants and support staff responsible for daily care, feeding, cleaning, and monitoring of animals.

Across these four units, SJACS reported 94 full-time equivalent staff for FY2024-25 and 102 budgeted staff for FY2025-26 ([see Figure 1](#)).

In recent years, the shelter has faced negative media coverage and sustained criticism from some animal advocates about the performance of the medical unit and shelter operations, among other things. Those advocates are to be commended for exposing deficiencies at the shelter and appropriately demanding that SJACS and the City be held accountable.

Since 2022, the shelter has been the subject of two independent reports.

The first was issued in 2022 by [Maddie's Million Pet Challenge](#) (Maddie's). Maddie's Million Pet Challenge is a collaboration with the Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program and the Koret Shelter

Medicine Program at the University of California, Davis, along with other partners, aimed at improving shelter operations and outcomes through shared expertise and best practices (Maddie's, 2022).

Maddie's report highlighted significant operational concerns, including overcrowding, staffing challenges, and more effective use of shelter software (Maddie's, 2022).

The second report was requested by the Mayor and City Council, conducted by the City Auditor, and after an extensive review was issued in 2024. [The City Auditor's](#) report evaluated the operations of SJACS in response to community concerns about shelter conditions and overcrowding (Office of the City Auditor, 2024). The report assessed the shelter against industry standards, reviewed data accuracy and transparency, examined animal care protocols, and evaluated relationships with rescue groups, volunteers, and partner jurisdictions. It identified key operational challenges, including capacity constraints, gaps in protocols and recordkeeping, and declining engagement with rescue partners. The report contained 39 recommendations to improve shelter capacity management, animal outcomes, transparency, and overall effectiveness.

Against this backdrop, SJACS, like all shelters, must contend with significant challenges confronting the field of animal welfare. The cost of veterinary care has risen substantially, outpacing annual inflation since 2019, according to the [American Veterinary Association](#) (Nolen, 2026). A nationwide shortage of veterinarians continues to limit shelters' ability to provide spay and neuter services, particularly in communities already facing economic hardship. At the same time, rising veterinary costs are making it harder for pet owners to afford routine care, leaving more animals untreated. Combined with increasing housing costs and rental restrictions on pets, especially large dogs, these pressures have forced more owners to surrender their animals. As a result, shelters are caring for a growing number of animals in poorer health that require longer stays (Grant, 2025).

In this environment, foster and rescue organizations play an increasingly essential role in helping the shelter stay within capacity and maintain positive outcomes. Shelters are designed to provide short-term solutions, ideally for no more than two weeks (Association of Shelter Veterinarians, Section 9.7.4, 2022). They are not intended to provide long-term housing for animals.

Animal foster organizations provide temporary, home-based care for animals that may not be well-suited to a shelter environment, such as very young, medically fragile, or behaviorally stressed animals. By placing animals in foster homes, shelters can reduce overcrowding, improve animal health and socialization, and increase the likelihood of successful adoption. Foster networks effectively expand a shelter's capacity without requiring additional physical space or staffing.

Animal rescue organizations, by contrast, typically take ownership of animals transferred from shelters and assume responsibility for their care, rehabilitation, and eventual adoption. These organizations may specialize in specific breeds or animals with medical or behavioral needs, among other areas of focus. Rescue organizations allow shelters to move animals out more quickly and focus limited resources on intake and urgent care. Together, foster and rescue organizations play a critical role in improving outcomes, reducing euthanasia rates, and enabling shelters to operate more effectively under constrained resources.

## METHODOLOGY

The Civil Grand Jury conducted interviews with current and former City employees and animal protection advocates and toured the shelter. The Civil Grand Jury reviewed Maddie's Million Pet Challenge (Maddie's) report issued in 2022, the extensive 2024 report issued by the Office of the City Auditor, which included SJACS's responses to the audit recommendations, and numerous media articles documenting complaints and concerns about the shelter.

The Civil Grand Jury also reviewed and analyzed data on the SJACS public data portal, particularly key outcomes such as intake, length of stay, adoptions, rescues, and live release rate; five years of annual reports produced by SJACS; the division's budget data, organization charts; and a facility condition assessment conducted in 2024 by Facility Engineering Associates, an outside consultant. In addition, the Civil Grand Jury reviewed documents, correspondence, policies, and several meetings of the San José City Council's Neighborhood Services and Education Committee at which the animal shelter was discussed.

## INVESTIGATION

The Civil Grand Jury initiated this investigation in response to complaints regarding shelter conditions and operations. The Civil Grand Jury is aware of the multiple reports by animal advocacy groups and the media alleging misconduct toward specific animals by staff, including incidents that reportedly resulted in the death of animals in shelter care.

While these incidents are serious and troubling, the Civil Grand Jury did not investigate individual cases. Instead, the Civil Grand Jury focused on the broader underlying causes of poor outcomes, including shelter management, operational performance, data quality, staffing challenges, and relationships with partners and the broader community. To place current conditions in context, it is helpful to review the key events and prior assessments that have shaped the shelter's operations.

### **Maddie's Million Pet Challenge**

In 2022, SJACS invited the Maddie's Million Pet Challenge to review the shelter.

By the time the Maddie's report was issued, the shelter was experiencing significant leadership turnover. The shelter manager had recently left to take another job, and both full-time veterinarians had resigned after many years of service resulting in a significant leadership vacuum. A new shelter division manager arrived just as the Maddie's report was issued, and a new medical director was hired several months later.

The Maddie's team visited the shelter and reviewed its operations. Its pro bono report was based on interviews with shelter staff, observations of operational processes, and a meeting with community stakeholders and advocates.

The report offered more than 200 recommendations that addressed all aspects of the shelter's operations. The Maddie's report highlighted several systemic issues. Some of the most serious concerns included:

- Critical vacancies, insufficient staffing levels, and limited volunteer support undermined basic care, slowed operations, and placed sustained stress on remaining staff;
- Animals did not move efficiently through the shelter, creating overcrowding and increased disease risk;
- Gaps in veterinary staffing and inefficient intake/health check processes delayed treatment, vaccination, and sterilization, prevented animals from becoming eligible for adoption or transfer;
- Too few animals were made available for adoption or placed in foster care, with missed opportunities to reduce the shelter population and animals' length of stay;

- Weak data management, inconsistent workflows, and poor coordination across functions created delays and duplication of effort.

The report pointed to a system operating beyond its limits, where staffing gaps, process inefficiencies, and weak population management reinforced one another and limited the shelter's ability to achieve timely, positive outcomes.

## City Auditor's Report

In September 2023, the Mercury News reported a [significant decline in the number of cats leaving the shelter alive](#) (Greschler, September 24, 2023). The following month, the Rules and Open Government Committee of the City Council approved an audit of the shelter's operations and conditions. In November 2023, the Mercury News reported on [troubling cases involving dogs](#) (Greschler, November 7, 2023).

The City Auditor's office released its report to the City Council in November 2024 with eight findings and 39 recommendations. The City reviewed the report and agreed with all the recommendations (City of San José, News Release, 2024).

The audit found, among other things, that the shelter:

- Frequently operated over its capacity, at one point housing about 700 animals;
- Needed to improve its data management and animal care protocols;
- Could improve outcomes for animals with stronger engagement with rescue organizations.

The audit also noted that the shelter had still not fully implemented recommendations contained in the earlier Maddie's report and lacked clear priorities, timelines, and accountability for completing that work.

In short, the City Auditor found that many of the same core issues persisted as identified in the Maddie's report: capacity is exceeded because animals stay too long, systems are inefficient, intake and medical processes are constrained, and adoptions and rescue organizations are underutilized. Together, the reports reinforce that these were not isolated problems but systemic failures in population management and operations at the shelter.

Since the release of the audit, the shelter has worked to address the recommendations. In March 2026, the [City Auditor reported](#) that all 39 recommendations had been implemented or addressed (Office of the City Auditor, 2026). The shelter provided requested documentation to support these actions; however, the City Auditor did not conduct an onsite follow-up audit.

The Civil Grand Jury also found that the shelter has made progress. SJACS has taken steps to better manage animal population levels, thereby reducing overcrowding that can lead to unhealthy and stressful conditions for animals.

SJACS improved its services for [rescue partners](#) by creating new processes and a self-service platform that lists animals available for rescue by species, with information about age, weight, behavior, and medical issues (City of San José, Rescue Partners, n.d.). The shelter also resumed limited spay and neuter services for the public in late 2025.

The Civil Grand Jury commends shelter leaders and staff for their efforts to implement the audit recommendations. However, the work is not complete. SJACS and the City must ensure that the newly established policies, procedures, and protocols are consistently followed by all shelter staff. The challenges facing the shelter developed over many years. Restoring the community's confidence in its operations will likewise take time.

## **Shelter Tour: Urgent Issue Requiring Immediate Attention**

During a March 2026 shelter tour, the Civil Grand Jury observed air flowing from the closed quarantine ward into the hallway. Properly designed quarantine areas maintain negative pressure, drawing air from clean spaces such as hallways into isolation rooms and exhausting it outside, thus preventing the pathogens from recirculating within the shelter (The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, Section 4.6, 2022). In this case, the ventilation system appeared to function in reverse, allowing potentially contaminated air to escape from the isolation area into clean, heavily trafficked areas of the facility. This condition should have been identified and corrected by personnel with appropriate training in animal facilities design and maintenance.

## **Capacity for Care**

Capacity for care is the number of animals a shelter can responsibly care for at a given time based on their needs and the shelter's resources. So, capacity for care is not a fixed headcount but a dynamic standard that reflects how many animals a shelter can responsibly care for at a given time while maintaining acceptable welfare outcomes. Unlike a simple "physical capacity" number (i.e., number of kennels), capacity for care varies based on the type, size, condition, and needs of the animals in the shelter. Healthy, behaviorally stable animals typically require fewer resources and can move through the system more quickly, while animals that are sick, injured, very young, or have behavioral challenges demand more space, staff time, medical care, and longer lengths of stay ([Association of Shelter Veterinarians](#), 2022).

Other factors such as staffing and budget also determine how many and what types of animals a shelter can humanely care for. As a result, the shelter may be well within its capacity for care at

one moment and over its capacity for care the next, even with the same number of animals. The shelter told the Civil Grand Jury that its capacity for care is 320. The shelter has capacity, or kennel space, to house 510 animals (Office of City Auditor, 2024).

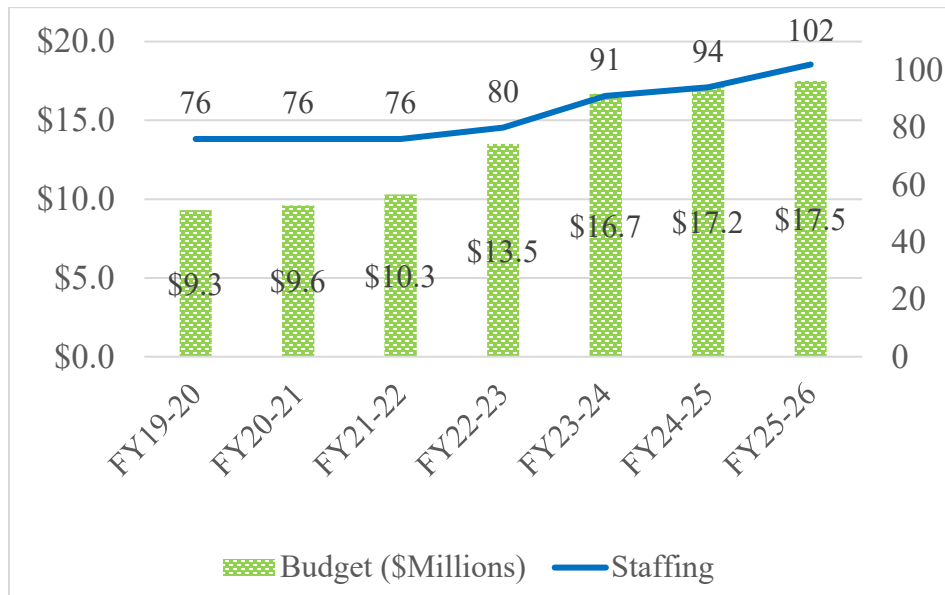
This distinction is reflected in recent data. On April 3, 2026, the shelter reported 244 animals which is below its stated capacity for care. However, because capacity for care fluctuates with intake pressures and animal needs, this margin may narrow quickly. The Civil Grand Jury was told that during kitten season the shelter is likely to exceed its capacity for care.

Kitten season is the period typically from late spring through summer when unspayed cats give birth in large numbers, leading to a sharp increase in kittens arriving at the shelter. These animals can require frequent feeding, medical treatment, and foster placement. As a result, kitten season places strain on shelter staffing, space, and medical capacity, often pushing shelters beyond their capacity for care even if physical kennel space remains available.

## **The Shelter Budget and Managing Intake of Animals**

SJACS's budget was just over \$9 million annually until FY2022-23, when the City increased the budget. The budget has nearly doubled since then, reaching \$17.5 million in FY2025-26. The latest increases were intended in part to implement audit recommendations and expand veterinary services ([see Figure 1](#)).

**Staffing and Budget Increases**



**Figure 1. Data from SJACS Reports, FY2019-20 through FY2025-26.**

While SJACS’s funding and staffing have increased, the Civil Grand Jury was told, the shelter, as a practice, has restricted intake of animals so it can operate within capacity. Both Maddie’s and the City Auditor emphasize the need for active population management. Because that change may not have been clearly communicated to partners and the public, some animal advocates have criticized the shelter for turning away animals.

As a public agency serving the community, SJACS must clearly communicate its decisions regarding shelter operations, services, and policies, including the reasons why it may not be able to accept every animal brought to the facility. The shelter staff need to explain to the public why it is in the best interest of the animals and the community to limit the intake of animals.

**Adoption and Rescue**

The shelter’s goal is not to house animals within the shelter indefinitely, but to move them quickly and efficiently into safe, permanent placements. Maintaining strong partnerships with rescue organizations is critical, as they expand placement capacity, reduce overcrowding, and improve outcomes. Adoptions also advance this goal by placing animals into stable homes.

Overall, while adoptions have increased significantly, transfers to rescue partners have declined sharply, as the City Auditor noted. SJACS reports adoptions rose from 1,468 in FY2020–21 to 4,505 in FY2024–25. During the same period, transfers to rescue partners dropped from 4,776 to 1,159 (Cano, 2022; Loesch, 2023; Loesch, 2024; Loesch, 2025).

The Civil Grand Jury did not determine the exact cause of this drop, which may include reduced rescue capacity, coordination challenges, or strained relationships with rescue partners. Other municipal shelters have also reported that moving animals to rescue has become more difficult (Office of the City Auditor, 2024). However, the City Auditor’s survey of rescue organizations noted that only 40 percent of respondents rated working with SJACS as positive. That percentage is a clear sign that SJACS is not working well with rescue groups.

The Civil Grand Jury notes that SJACS, in late 2025, dedicated one of its coordinators specifically to rescue efforts, a positive step toward strengthening these partnerships, but this action alone is insufficient. Rescue placements have not yet improved. Further, the City Auditor’s rescue recommendations focused on processes to improve outcomes, not the quality of SJACS’ relationships with rescue organizations. To create lasting change, SJACS must significantly expand its collaboration with rescue organizations while sustaining its higher adoption rates.

## **Spay and Neuter Services**

Animal shelters typically provide two distinct types of spay and neuter services. Trap–Neuter–Release (TNR) programs address community (feral) cats by humanely trapping them, sterilizing and vaccinating them, and then returning them to their original location; this stabilizes colonies and reduces future population growth. At SJACS, the trapping itself is typically performed by residents, volunteers, or partner organizations rather than shelter staff.

In contrast, public spay and neuter services for owned animals provide low-cost or subsidized surgeries to pet owners, helping prevent unwanted litters. Together, these services are complementary, targeting both unowned and owned animal populations to manage overall intake and improve community animal welfare. Spay and neuter for owned animals is further discussed below in the section on “Serving the Community.”

Spay and neuter services are also supported by a clear legal framework in California. State law requires that dogs and cats adopted from shelters or rescue organizations be sterilized (Cal. Food & Agr. Code §§ 30503, 30520–30522). This statutory requirement underscores the importance of these services as a core component of responsible shelter operations and population management.

By working in partnership with community groups to provide TNR services, the shelter can directly influence the size and growth of the feral cat population. Unfortunately, in FY2021–22, the shelter suspended TNR services for community cats (Cano, 2022). Limited services resumed late in FY2022–23 (Loesch, 2023), and since the release of the audit, have been modestly expanded, increasing from one day per week to two. While this progress reflects renewed

engagement in population control, the scope of services remains constrained relative to the scale of need.

The audit recommended that SJACS expand TNR and community spay and neuter by contracting with outside providers for both community cats and shelter animals. SJACS reported to the City Auditor that it has contracts with two vendors through September 2026 and plans to solicit additional providers to expand service capacity.

## **The Devil is in the Data**

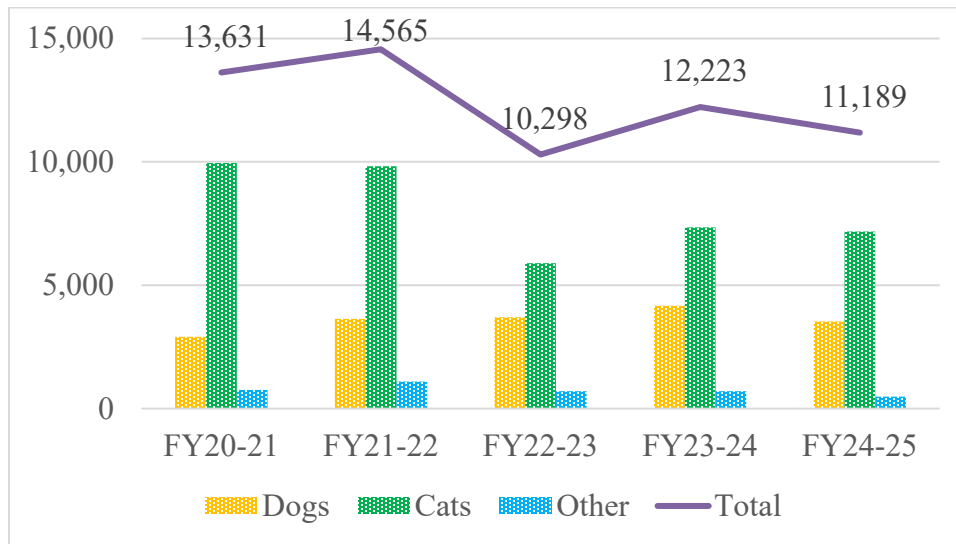
SJACS management states that it has improved outcomes for pets entering the shelter (Loesch, 2025). But the Civil Grand Jury found that many of the shelter's key metrics taken from SJACS's own data portal do not show consistent improvement over time.

Compared with FY2020-21, shelter intake was 18% lower by FY2024-25 ([see Figure 2](#)). SJACS has reported that since FY2020-21, a greater proportion of animals arriving are unhealthy or require significant medical treatment (Loesch, 2025). Due to that change, SJACS staff believe several key performance indicators have worsened.

Cats and dogs remain in the shelter longer than they did in FY2020-21, with some improvement in FY2024-25 ([see Figure 4](#)). The live-release rate has declined 2% since FY2024-25 ([see Figure 3](#)). Live-release rate measures the percentage of animals that leave the shelter alive through adoption, return to owner, transfer to another organization for adoption, or any other lifesaving program (The National Federation of Humane Societies, 2011).

Finally, as already noted, transfers to rescue partners have decreased dramatically, which negatively impacts the length of stay and ultimately, the shelter's ability to operate within its capacity for care ([see Figure 4](#)).

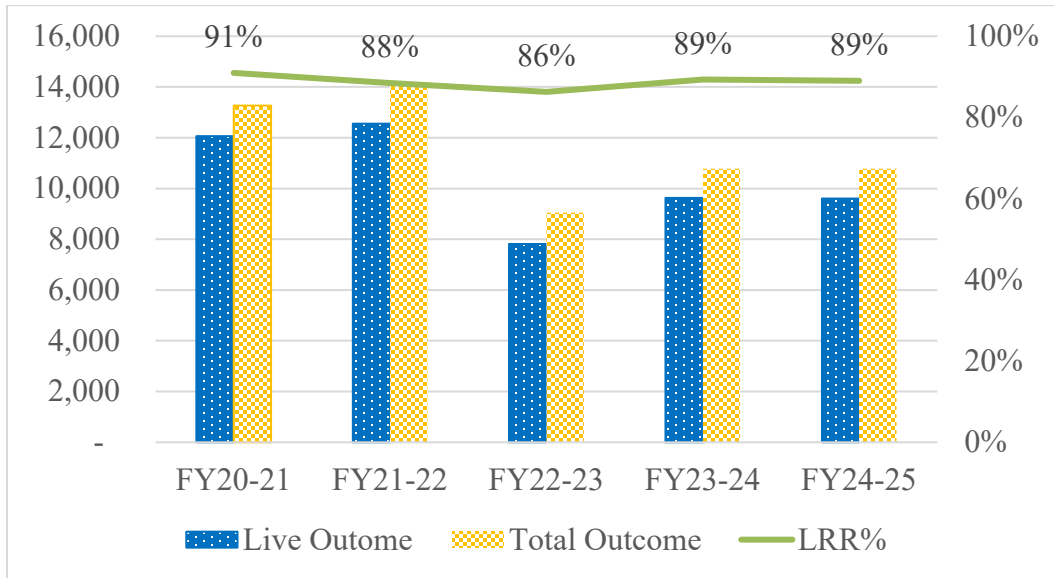
**Animal Intake Five-Year Trend**



	FY20-21	FY21-22	FY22-23	FY23-24	FY24-25
Dogs	2,910	3,637	3,703	4,171	3,532
Cats	9,958	9,830	5,893	7,342	7,176
Other	763	1,098	702	710	481
Total	13,631	14,565	10,298	12,223	11,189

**Figure 2. Data extracted from SJACS presentation to the San José City Council’s Neighborhood Services and Education Committee, December 11, 2025.**

**Overall Live Release Rate (LRR) Five-Year Trend**



	Live Outcome	Total Outcome	LRR%
FY20-21	12,069	13,267	91%
FY21-22	12,560	14,200	88%
FY22-23	7,809	9,049	86%
FY23-24	9,624	10,775	89%
FY24-25	9,600	10,781	89%

**Figure 3. Data extracted from SJACS Annual Report approved October 1, 2025.**

Average Length of Stay in Days

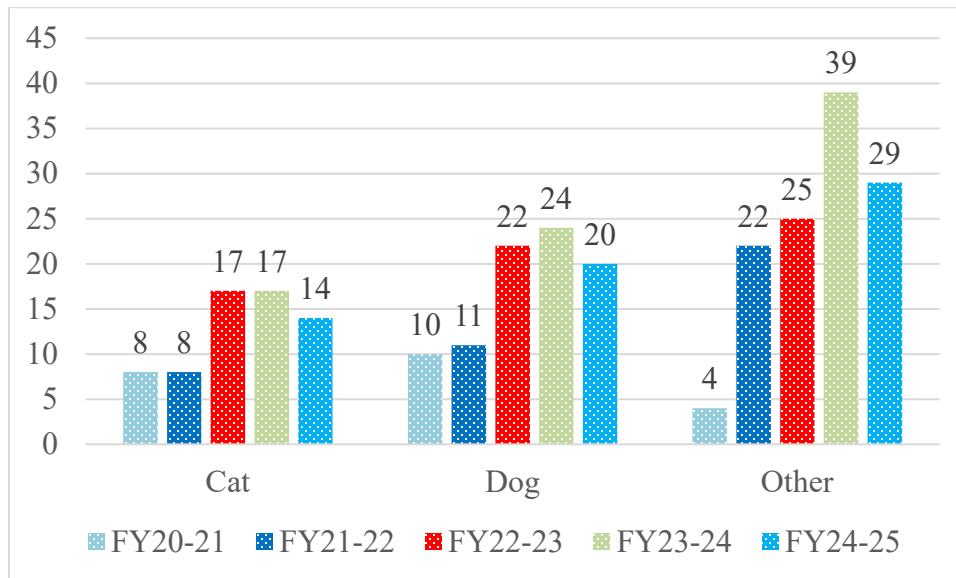


Figure 4. Data extracted March 22, 2026, from shelter Public Reporting Dashboard.

Animal advocates have raised concerns about inconsistencies in the shelter’s data and what they believe are intentional changes in how certain metrics are reported. This has driven some critics to question whether SJACS is manipulating data to show improvements that do not exist.

That is in part because SJACS has changed some shelter data categories, methodologies, and historical data.

For example, the Civil Grand Jury noted that total animal intake in FY2023-24 was reported as 13,212 in SJACS’s annual report dated December 7, 2024 (Loesch, 2024). But in the subsequent year’s annual report, the same total intake data was reported as 12,233 (Loesch, 2025).

Shelter management provided several explanations for the changing data. The shelter used to include wildlife in its total intake, but no longer does. In addition, the shelter’s intake numbers used to include TNR animals brought in for spay and neuter. However, spay and neuter is a service the shelter provides, and those animals should not be counted in intake since they are not housed in the shelter. And in the past, the Civil Grand Jury was told, animals that came back into the shelter after being sent to foster homes were counted again when they returned.

The Civil Grand Jury downloaded and analyzed multiple years of data from the SJACS public portal. More than 800 animals in the five-year data set, or the equivalent of three animals per week, did not have outcomes listed, meaning they were not tracked as adopted, rescued, euthanized,

returned to the owner, or any other result. Shelter leaders offered a number of explanations, including that there are animals listed in the public portal that are not included in the shelter's own statistics. For example, animals that receive a license at the shelter but are never admitted to the shelter are included in the data portal but not in the shelter's own statistics.

Greater transparency regarding these kinds of changes in data would help the public better understand why some historical data does not seem consistent. SJACS should either align historical data with its current reporting methodology or clearly note on its public data portal when definitions or data categories have changed from year to year and are no longer comparable.

## **Availability of Data**

SJACS shares a significant amount of information publicly. Among peer agencies reviewed during the City Auditor's benchmarking analysis, only the City of Sacramento and County of Los Angeles offered comparable interactive public data dashboards. However, SJACS's data portal is difficult to locate. Visitors to the [shelter's website](#) must know to navigate from the SJACS main page to "Additional Services," then click the "About Us" tab in the left margin and click on "[ACS Public Reporting](#)"— none of which is intuitive (City of San José, ACS Public Reporting, n.d.).

SJACS does not publicly report the shelter's capacity level. As a result, members of the public cannot easily determine whether the shelter currently has space available or is operating near or above its capacity for care. According to local media reports, [shelter overcrowding has been a concern](#) as recently as January 2026, and publicly reporting capacity levels could improve transparency and help build trust with both rescue partners and the broader community (Favro, 2026).

## **Data Access and Integrity**

Most shelter employees have broad access to the data systems and can enter or edit shelter data, the audit noted. In addition, internal controls and standardized processes governing data entry and management appear to be limited.

The City Auditor's report noted that no individual had been formally assigned responsibility for overseeing data quality and that staff reported there was no regular review of data entry quality.

Since the release of the audit, SJACS has hired a system applications programmer to oversee data management, including reducing errors, training, updating procedures for data entry, and ensuring accuracy in data searches, according to the update released in March 2026 by the City Auditor. SJACS reported to the City Auditor that it has started developing procedures and documents to

help with data-entry training, met with its vendor to learn about data controls that could reduce errors, and rewritten report queries.

SJACS recently created an internal data users group comprised of representatives from each operational unit and from the City's Information Technology department. While this represents a positive step toward improving data oversight, additional measures such as regular data reviews and long-term adherence to new protocols are needed to ensure consistent data management and reporting practices.

Further, the shelter should ensure that its public data portal clearly indicates when data is updated, explains the reasons for any updates, and documents any changes to categories or other critical information. These steps will enhance transparency.

## Public Criticism

During public meetings and in media interviews, some animal advocates have vehemently disagreed that the shelter has improved. Groups such as Sustain Our Shelters and San Jose Animal Partners have documented cases in which animals have died, lost a limb, or otherwise experienced inadequate care, among other problems that illustrate their concerns about the shelter's operations. For example, six months after the City Auditor released its report, [a shelter dog named Lola died](#) after getting tangled in a slip leash and an IV cord at night (Favro, 2025).

In the summer of 2025, former employees and volunteers joined advocates and rescue groups in [calling for new leadership at the shelter](#), alleging mistreatment of animals and retaliation against staff or volunteers who raised concerns (Freimarck, 2025).

Early in 2026, some advocates who question whether there has been progress at the shelter hired an attorney and sent the City a letter [demanding immediate improvements](#) (Patel, 2026).

The sustained criticism has led some within SJACS to conclude that its most vocal critics cannot be satisfied. That view, however, risks obscuring an important reality: The shelter's long-term success depends on rebuilding trust with the community it serves. This requires a deliberate, sustained effort to strengthen relationships with rescue organizations, foster groups, the media, and even its most persistent critics.

At the December 11, 2025, meeting of the Neighborhood Services and Education Committee, a Deputy City Manager stated that there was a "tug of war" between the community and the shelter staff and emphasized the need to bridge that divide. These remarks further highlight the need to shift to a more constructive approach that prioritizes communication, accountability, and

partnership (San José City Council Neighborhood Services and Education Committee meeting, 2025).

The Civil Grand Jury finds that the shelter should expand its efforts to engage with the broader community. The City should create a community advisory group to help bridge the divide referenced at the Neighborhood Services meeting in December. In addition, shelter leaders should communicate with the public more effectively about the challenges in placing certain animals, particularly large dogs, and the factors contributing to longer shelter stays. This could be done on the shelter website, in newsletters, and on SJACS social media channels.

## **Serving the Community**

The shelter only recently resumed limited public spay and neuter services for owned animals. As of December 2025, SJACS began providing these services two days a week, one day for about 12 dogs and one day for about 20 cats. SJACS does not widely publicize these services because it says the shelter does not have the consistent capacity to offer more.

At the same time, rising veterinary costs and increasing financial pressures on residents are likely to increase the community's need for affordable spay and neuter services. SJACS should explore options to further increase public spay and neuter services. The City Auditor's report noted that SJACS has an agreement with the Humane Society of Silicon Valley to provide low cost spay and neuter services to "underserved communities," but that agreement does not specify a quantity of service to be provided or how often service should be provided (Office of the City Auditor, 2024).

The City Auditor's report noted that staffing constraints limited SJACS's ability to provide spay and neuter for shelter animals, community cats and owned pets. During site visits, the Auditor observed that approximately half of the animals had not been spayed or neutered. Because California law requires animals to be sterilized prior to adoption or release, these animals could not be readily adopted until they were sterilized.

The City Auditor also noted that some jurisdictions provide more spay and neuter opportunities for community cats and for owned pets. For example, Oakland and Sacramento reported providing access to free vaccinations and spay and neuter services. (Office of City Auditor, 2024).

Expanding access to these services could help prevent unwanted litters and reduce the number of animals entering the shelter system. It would also improve overall animal welfare outcomes in the community.

## Rebuilding Trust

There is a significant difference between how SJACS leaders characterize their progress and how some animal advocates view current conditions.

SJACS leaders maintain that they have made substantial improvements in recent years. They point out the implementation of the audit recommendations and report that the shelter is now operating within its established capacity for care.

To rebuild trust and improve outcomes for both animals and the public it serves, the shelter must increase transparency, actively seek public input, and strengthen partnerships with community organizations. As mentioned in the Maddie's report, transparency helps people understand what SJACS can provide and what they need. The report also stated that "in general, the community does not know you need help unless you ask them" (Maddie's, 2022).

An assessment of community needs could help the shelter assess the scope and level of services already being provided and where needs are not being met. Such an assessment would help align SJACS services with actual community needs. As stated by The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, "Programs and collaborations have the biggest impact when they reflect principles of community engagement, including respect for each other's values and cultures. The community's needs should be regularly reviewed, and strategies and goals updated accordingly" (The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, p. 5, 2022).

In addition, a community advisory board made up of representatives from San José and other cities served by the shelter could help the City and SJACS receive public input, communicate the challenges it faces, discuss service changes, and gather information from the community. This would allow the shelter to stay connected to the needs of the community it serves.

Other agencies have created similar advisory bodies. For example, San Francisco's Commission of Animal Control and Welfare is an advisory body that ensures government entities are aware of important animal issues (City and County of San Francisco, n.d.).

## CONCLUSION

For the shelter to succeed, it must not only focus on housing and treating the animals under its care, but also fully embrace the community it serves—including foster and rescue organizations, volunteers, and its critics—as essential partners in improving outcomes for animals. The Civil Grand Jury finds that for all parties to begin rebuilding trust, SJACS must embrace community members, advocates, and rescue partners as collaborators rather than obstacles.

Building that trust will require both transparency and effective engagement. The shelter should communicate more clearly about its data, challenges, and the rationale behind its policies and decisions, while acknowledging concerns and responding constructively.

In addition, the shelter should use its data to identify service gaps and target outreach where it will have the greatest impact. Expanding partnerships and empowering the community to participate in solutions will help improve outcomes for animals and establish the sustained public trust necessary for long-term success.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Finding 1**

The ventilation system in the isolation areas was not functioning correctly, allowing potentially contaminated air to escape into clean, heavily trafficked areas of the facility.

### **Recommendation 1**

The City should inspect and adjust ventilation systems as needed to ensure they function properly in both isolation rooms and throughout the facility.

This recommendation should be implemented by October 31, 2026, or sooner if possible.

### **Finding 2**

The number of animals taken by rescue partners has declined significantly since 2021.

### **Recommendation 2**

The City needs to develop a plan and timeline to repair, maintain and expand relationships with rescue partners with the goal of increasing the number of animals placed for rescue.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

### **Finding 3**

The current provision of public spay and neuter services is insufficient to meet the volume of animals in the communities SJACS serves.

### **Recommendation 3**

The City should expand public spay and neuter services, either at the shelter, in community spay clinics, or by partnering with more organizations to provide services.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

### **Finding 4**

SJACS has changed some shelter data categories, methodologies, and historical data, and does not consistently note changes in the public data portal or explain resulting inconsistencies.

**Recommendation 4a**

The City must provide accurate, clear, and complete data so the public can assess performance. Formal protocols for data handling, security, and publication should be established to ensure data is accurate, standardized, and consistently reported.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 4b**

The City should report the shelter’s available capacity as suggested by the City Auditor on the SJACS public data portal and website to communicate to the public how often the shelter is operating at capacity, over capacity, or under capacity.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 4c**

The City should require that when SJACS makes changes to its posted data or to data categories, that SJACS should consistently provide the public with a rationale for the modification and note the change.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 4d**

The City should report the number of animals turned away due to capacity limitations on the SJACS public data portal, quarterly at the City Council’s Neighborhood Services & Education Committee meetings, and yearly in SJACS annual report.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Finding 5**

There is a trust gap between SJACS and some animal advocates.

**Recommendation 5a**

To rebuild public trust, the City should issue a public follow-up report to the 2024 audit that clearly explains improvements made and how it will monitor consistent implementation of new processes and training and sustain ongoing improvements.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 5b**

The City should establish a community advisory group composed of residents from each City Council district and each contract city. This group should elevate neighborhood and resident concerns, improve communication about the shelter’s services and needs, and foster meaningful engagement between shelter staff and the communities they serve.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 5c**

The City should conduct a public needs assessment to determine how best to meet the needs of the communities SJACS serves.

This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**REQUIRED RESPONSES**

**Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933(a) et seq. and California Penal Code section 933.05, the 2025-2026 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing body:**

<b>Responding Agency</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
City of San José	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	1, 2, 3, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 5a, 5b, 5c



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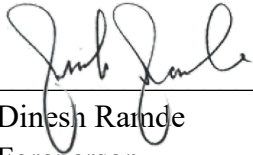
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This report was **ADOPTED** by the 2025-2026 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury on this 27th day of May, 2026.



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Dinesh Rande  
Foreperson