



FIVE YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

2023-2027

LOUDOUN COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

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LOUDOUN
COUNTY
VIRGINIA

Animal Services



INTRODUCTION

It is my pleasure to introduce the five-year Strategic Plan for Loudoun County Animal Services (LCAS). Our previous plan led our team through novel learning and outreach initiatives, partnerships with the community, and most significantly, the opening of a new, state-of-the-art Animal Services facility in Leesburg. However, when we set out to achieve these goals, we certainly could not have predicted a global pandemic and its profound impact on our operations, our community, and the world.

COVID-19 taught our staff lessons in loss and resilience and guided us to prioritize pet owners through practices of compassion and equity, more than we ever have before. We knew that this strategic plan would have to put pet owners front and center, as countless people faced unprecedented challenges in their economic, social, employment and personal conditions. Over the past year, our staff and volunteers worked to solicit feedback from thousands of stakeholders, identifying key areas of improvement and growth to help Loudoun's residents and their pets, livestock and local wildlife through the next five years. The resulting plan is one that is ambitious and exciting, but completely within the realm of possibility for a community who has shown such a remarkable level of support for our department's focus on progressive animal welfare practices.

In addition to focusing on the needs of our human and animal residents, this plan elevates the development and support of our staff and the mentorship of others in the animal welfare industry. We understand that, in order to serve our community best, we must ensure that our team has tools available to them to combat compassion fatigue and develop and share their comprehensive professional skills. We will continue to take a position against divisive industry language and bullying and recognize that building our fellow agencies and animal welfare supporters up, is always far more valuable, and kinder, than breaking them down. We will maintain our commitment to elevating public safety and humane law enforcement practices, and ensure that our officers and our staff are able to work together seamlessly to provide voices to the voiceless.

This year, we saw a live release rate of 95% of animals through our shelter, while our officers were able to resolve 95% of their calls outside of court, demonstrating our commitment to progressive, humane practices for animals and people. We hope to continue seeing that level of success as we work to achieve additional goals in sheltering, outreach and law enforcement. With the support of Loudoun's residents, we believe anything is possible, and this plan reflects that level of ambition. I am thankful to all who provided us with guidance and feedback throughout this process as we embark on our mission to support those who need us most, with voices and without, and look forward to seeing all that the next five years will bring.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nina Stively". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nina Stively, Director

MISSION

We resolve to serve our community by promoting public safety and the compassionate treatment of all animals through humane education, community outreach, sheltering and law enforcement.

VISION

Recognizing the community's commitment toward progressive animal welfare and public safety, we will strive to provide accessible services and responsive programming while demonstrating the highest ethical standards as animal welfare professionals.



County Leadership Values

How LCAS Embodies These Values

Accountability:

Taking ownership of our decisions and our actions

Our Department operates with a persistent theme of transparency. We post all statistics publicly, address challenging questions with direct answers (no matter how difficult), communicate with citizens on the front end and are not afraid to admit when we can improve. Throughout our operations, we use a system of internal checks and balances through routine case reviews and record audits.

Customer Service:

Meeting the needs of all we serve in a timely, dependable and compassionate manner

We strive to focus on citizen care without judgment, adhere to dedicated standards for response time, and continue to recognize the human element in animal services. We demonstrate a commitment to equity and inclusivity by treating all people and animals with respect and consideration; appreciating individuality, varied needs and cultural differences and approaching all people and situations with a fair and fresh perspective.

Excellence:

Striving to achieve the best results

Through meeting 100% of the Association of Shelter Veterinarian's (ASV) Animal Shelter Guidelines, we demonstrate our commitment to excellence and serve as leaders in the animal welfare industry. Through compassionate and progressive programs, we provide exceptional customer experiences, progressive education programs and support services to meet the diverse needs of our customers and the animals in our community.

Integrity:

Adhering to honest and ethical behavior

Throughout all levels of the Department, we emphasize the elements of full transparency and disclosure. As a team, we commit to acknowledging that we may not always know the answer but are always willing to connect people with the best resources to get the answers that they need. We will uphold local and state laws and adhere to professional codes of ethics.

Professionalism:

Demonstrating expertise, credibility, and respect for others

We value our employees and volunteers and place the highest priority on professional development to assist us in meeting the needs of our community. We have a commitment to treating the public and coworkers equitably, with respect, honesty and kindness.





AREAS OF FOCUS

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Over the past year, Loudoun County Animal Services (LCAS) has surveyed the community and our staff to develop an understanding of local priorities, while keeping pace with national industry progress. LCAS has determined that the primary areas of focus for the next five years will be:



To serve as a local and regional leader in industry best practices



Expansion of outreach services



Deliberate consideration and integration of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) into all aspects of operations



Ongoing improvement of internal infrastructure



To serve as a multifaceted local resource, offering comprehensive services and programs

Each of the five focus areas are designed to support Loudoun County's continuing evolution in the needs of the community's people, pets, livestock and wildlife, while strengthening LCAS' ability to provide comprehensive services. Being the first public animal shelter in the United States to meet 100% of the Association of Animal Shelter Veterinarians' Animal Shelter Guidelines, LCAS is in a unique position to serve as a mentor and leader to others in the industry while continuing to develop our own staff. It is the goal of this strategic plan to guide the department in delivering local services in such a manner that residents' ever-changing needs are met, while offering training, development and mentorship opportunities to other professionals in the field, in order to best lead the region and the nation in animal welfare, humane law enforcement and the preservation of the human-animal bond.





GOAL ONE

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To serve as a local and regional leader in industry best practices



Currently, LCAS is the only public shelter in the United States to meet 100% of the ASV Animal Shelter Guidelines. The guidelines are recognized nationally as the “go to” guide for establishing the standard of care of animals in shelters. While some of this achievement is attributable to the new facility, a great deal of the criteria relates to operations, programs and protocols. LCAS has extremely high standards of care and is in a position to support and influence those in other agencies and jurisdictions as they seek to elevate the standard of care in their facilities and their communities. Serving in a teaching role can be tremendously helpful to our existing staff, as they seek to further their own skills, and greater professional visibility of the department will positively contribute to recruitment and retention efforts.

Achievable How-to

Host professional trainings and conferences, taught by our staff

Make LCAS a training destination for the region, utilizing in-house knowledge to further develop our team, while enhancing the skills of other professionals

Host professional trainings and conferences, taught by external staff

Foster internal staff development, while offering a location for training for animal owners and advocates in addition to animal welfare and law enforcement professionals.

Establish and execute a structured mentorship program for animal welfare professionals

Develop an outline to evaluate the methodology around selecting mentees, hosting apprenticeships, and offering on-site job shadowing; develop a resource library for mentees to continue to access.

Host veterinary professionals and students looking to expand their skills in shelter/community veterinary medicine.

Establish reasonable guidelines for participation that align with goals of the organization and the needs of the community (e.g. surgical sterilization, population-level medicine, public clinics).

Determine who our primary partners are in animal sheltering and law enforcement and evaluate two-way support for mutual development.

Support interagency ride-alongs, shadow days and tours; ensure our team is learning from agencies with diverse backgrounds, experiences and service areas, while establishing relationships for ongoing professional development

Develop a professional resource library accessible to those in animal care industries

Assemble materials in a variety of formats (e.g. social media, print, web-based, etc.) to help establish industry application of best practices such as enrichment, behavior modification, and new owner resources.





GOAL TWO

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Expansion of outreach services



In the year since opening the Leesburg facility, LCAS has seen dramatic increases in the number of visitors and demand for public services beyond law enforcement and animal sheltering. Educational programs routinely are booked within minutes of being advertised, open trainings and informational sessions fill beyond capacity, and requests for youth programs significantly exceeds availability. In order to further improve the welfare of animals in the community, develop youth interest in animals and animal-related professions, and provide opportunities for community education and engagement, LCAS must continually review the availability of services to ensure equitable access and sustainable growth. It is likely that this area's growth will be limited by staffing, necessitating additional FTEs to support community interest and demand.

Achievable How-to

Develop new, and revitalize old, relationships with agricultural and hunting communities

Improve and promote Operation Protect Livestock; develop lasting relationships with 4H chapters; engage and have a presence at existing agricultural events such as Loudoun Farm Tour and Loudoun County Fair.

Develop a multiyear plan on partnering with the veterinary community

Evaluate the CARE program and reconsider its applications; offer limited services through referral from local vets (e.g., emergency pyometra surgery); provide continuing education opportunities. Collaborate with veterinarians and veterinary technicians in private practice to offer community-based wellness clinics.

Expand the services provided at community clinics

Provide additional vaccines and wellness exams; offer behavior and training programs; consider partnering with local businesses to offer accessible training and grooming services; consider expanding spay/neuter services to populations with a demonstrated need.

Further promote and improve dog licensing, rabies vaccine and commercial and releasing agency compliance

Support legislation pertaining to oversight of professional animal breeding and releasing agencies; develop and distribute materials on dog licensing to be provided to dealers and releasing agencies; enhance messaging to the general public on the value of dog licensing; create multilingual materials for distribution through new channels.

Reassess and expand the volunteer program beyond general animal care

Solicit and train volunteers for specific areas of need (e.g. translation, seasonal, event staffing, medical, adoption, retention, and return-to-owner services); create a strong mentor program for experienced volunteers to support and train new volunteers; develop an annual list of programs to be fulfilled entirely by corporate/group volunteers.





GOAL THREE

Incorporation of DEIA into all aspects of operations

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Loudoun County is a rapidly growing community. In order to continually meet the needs of our residents, we must recognize the value that diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility bring to our operation. More than 70% of households in the United States own a pet and supporting a humane community means recognizing that many pet owners have different backgrounds, cultures, needs and experiences, but all have experienced the power of the human-animal bond. Historically, in the United States, animal welfare has lagged behind many industries in addressing a lack of diverse representation on staff. However, it is the goal of LCAS to openly recognize our opportunities for growth in this area, and work to resolve them in order to best serve all of our residents while setting an example for other agencies.

Achievable How-to

Define “pet inclusive housing” and work to expand its presence in Loudoun

Work with HOAs and rental associations and property management companies to reduce or eliminate pet ownership restrictions that disproportionately impact lower-income residents; research funding availability for pet deposits; provide “good pet owner” academy to help improve landlord perceptions and confidence in renting to pet owners.

Assess the application of the CARE program beyond medical needs

Review historical data to determine if one-time funding for lower-income[1] families will help with pet retention through provision of services or materials (e.g. training, fencing, supplies).

[1] Lower income families are those below the median household income, and typically have higher representation in the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index. These families are more likely to rent, rather than own, their home, and are in a position to face greater barriers in access to public services, including Animal Services, and are more often subject to variable housing restrictions involving pet ownership.

Emphasize the value of bilingual employees

Promote bilingual incentive in all job postings; offer EMPACT awards to staff who provide translation services, work with the County's Human Resources Department to develop plans for recruitment and retention of bilingual employees, including for those who speak languages other than Spanish.

Work to understand how we can better recruit and retain staff who represent our community

Undertake a review of why staff leave and where they are going; assess applicant pool through demographic data; focus community events more frequently in communities that we serve, but are not seeing applications come in from; refocus message on what is important to our communities, rather than what is important to our department; ensure humane law enforcement has opportunities to have positive, (non-enforcement related) interactions with residents; review marketing/social materials with consideration for representation; ensure new initiatives offer ADA accommodations.

Define “underserved” and identify who most needs additional services in Loudoun

Recognize transportation and language limitations with regards to access to all and work to minimize the impacts of these barriers; determine what creates a pet owner resource desert; collect statistics on the need for translation services when in the field or at the shelter; engage with ELL programs to develop relationships and trust.

Utilize the Pets for Life service model

Partner with existing agencies working with lower-resourced communities; rebrand the mobile adoption unit to a community service delivery system; review available data to identify trends; ensure standard materials are available in common languages utilized in Loudoun and are readily accessible to our field staff, as well as others who may find it useful for their clients, such as veterinarians; consider disability access in field programs

Continue to review and improve return to owner initiatives

Attempt to determine the reasons that lost pets are not reclaimed and address those reasons (e.g. transportation, fees, fears/misperceptions, ignorance); focus microchipping initiatives in areas where reclaim rates are lower; reduce stigma around surrendering pets so that owners feel less inclined to bring them in as strays.

Ensure staff is well informed in the areas of DEIA

Provide routine training for all staff; normalize conversations around DEIA; require those in leadership, especially those in hiring roles, recognize the value of a diverse staff and are provided appropriate training.



GOAL FOUR

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Improvement of internal infrastructure



The staff at Loudoun County Animal Services are the backbone of the organization. It is recognized that long-term success for LCAS will only be possible through providing the staff with the resources and training that are needed to recruit and retain the best, and confirm that the team has maximum opportunities to succeed. With the relocation to Leesburg, traffic to the facility has skyrocketed, necessitating more employees and additional well-structured internal procedures to ensure consistent, high-quality delivery of services and comprehensive preparedness for events, emergencies and fluctuating needs. While the other goals in this strategic plan are crucial to long-term success, it is understood that they cannot be accomplished without a strong human and procedural infrastructure.

Achievable

How-to

Come up with a long-range staffing plan

Use Leesburg facility data and county population data to make projections on needs; evaluate whether current demand can be met by current staff. -How many staff are needed using legitimate data?

Develop staff through shelter swap programs

Establish shelter swap partners; establish criteria for participation (internal and external); align program with current goals (e.g. send our staff to a shelter using Pets for Life, receive staff from a shelter implementing new enrichment programs); determine measures for success.

Evaluate the limitations imposed by current laws and propose changes

Identify which local issues or laws limit our ability to be fully successful, and work with the Board of Supervisors, policymakers, and professional associations to support change. This may include local issues such as pet inclusive housing, or state issues, such as expansion of permissions for LVTs, hazardous pay for HLEOs, kennel/dealer licensure, and cruelty law amendments.

Establish flowcharts for consistent application of policies and procedures

Ensure flowcharts are part of staff onboarding and readily accessible to them at all times; use consistent language in all graphics; develop public-facing flowcharts to help empower the community with solutions; provide public facing materials in Spanish (at a minimum).

Establish and train with standardized messaging

Regularly review and update FAQs on the website; review FAQs with all new staff; ensure any written materials are translation-friendly; provide role-playing practice sessions for public-facing roles in answering common questions.

Establish continuing education plan

Determine the key areas of retraining needs and set an annual schedule; continually review and revise training schedule to evolve with departmental needs; ensure training is focused on human needs in addition to animal welfare; ensure ongoing training around bias and communication are focal.

Revise or establish comprehensive emergency planning procedures

Work with OEM and other departments to develop and drill emergency plans and procedures for various scenarios (fire evacuation, DFS co-sheltering, active shooter, large seizure, natural disaster, etc.); ensure all emergency supplies are maintained on a regular basis; provide regular training on AED, CPR and first aid.





GOAL FIVE

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Serve as a multifaceted resource



Traditionally, the role of an Animal Services' agency has been directly related to animal sheltering and animal control. However, the needs in this area have changed dramatically over the past ten years, with the industry now focusing more on the human-animal bond, retention of pets in their original homes, emergency temporary sheltering for families in crisis, communications-based pet adoptions, community-oriented law enforcement and professionalization of the field as a whole. Loudoun County Animal Services is routinely contacted by members of the community to provide guidance or assistance on complex matters, and the region as a whole will benefit as the department continues to evolve and provide different services to our residents than those once in demand.

Achievable

How-to

Offer comprehensive library of interactive resources

Ensure accessible materials for laypeople are available in a variety of formats and languages; provide physical brochures at mobile events

Provide comprehensive resources for small animals and their owners

Elevate presence of small animals in media materials; offer ongoing small animal events to develop social community for small animal owners; offer low-cost veterinary service events geared towards small animals; utilize SMEs to host trainings and programs in various locations; consider ongoing PSAs around common small animal issues (abandonment, containment for parakeets and rabbits, adequate care, etc.).

Create comprehensive support experiences for fosters, adopters and those considering surrender.

Provide resources to help people rehome pets on their own safely; combat rehoming stigma on social media with educational messaging; encourage communities to develop their own foster network to support families in crisis.

Focus on novel retention needs to reduce separation of pets and people.

Host workshops in various locations on common areas of interest (pet insurance, inclusion of pets in estate planning); offer off-site training and care courses to support landlord-friendly pet owners.

Evaluate our role in community TNR

Expand reach of monthly TNR clinics, assess offering transportation to/from areas of need; network with community cat advocates to collect data on high-population areas.

Repurpose the mobile adoption unit

Focus the mobile adoption unit on community-based programs to meet people where they are, providing low-cost veterinary and/or free educational services.



STAFFING CONCEPTS FOR CONSIDERATION



Over the next five years, Loudoun County Animal Services expects that demand for many services will grow, regardless of population stabilization and increased median age. The current location in Leesburg is more central than the previous location, and nationwide, interest in animal sheltering, humane education, animal welfare programming and humane law enforcement has increased, leading us to expect similar service expectations on a local level. However, at this point in time, the facility has only been open for one year, and LCAS leadership has determined that more metrics are necessary to make accurate projections for long-term growth and staffing needs, before formally determining which resources will be requested.

At this point, however, it is clear that customer interest in Animal Services has far exceeded pre-relocation projections. Foot traffic to the Leesburg shelter averages 4,000 visitors per month, (approximately three times the number of visitors to the Waterford location) and there has been an explosion of community interest in volunteering and programs. Over the past year, 99% of LCAS programs hosted at the animal shelter saw their registrations filled to capacity (or beyond, necessitating a wait list) within 48 hours of posting and more than 30 requests for attendance at offsite events had to be denied due to limited staffing. LCAS-hosted low-cost veterinary service events are also routinely at maximum capacity, and the national veterinary shortage has been identified as a key risk factor in veterinary public health management and animal shelter intakes nationwide, indicating that addressing this gap may prove vital in pet retention and disease management efforts as pet ownership percentages remain high.

In addition to managing in-facility traffic, and outreach program demands, it is likely that the need for more comprehensive coverage by the humane law enforcement team will be necessary, as current staffing levels necessitate regular support from other departments (via the Emergency Communications Center, Loudoun County Sheriff's Office and town police departments), and, complexity of criminal cases is on the rise.

The following positions are all under consideration for request throughout the course of this strategic plan, and metrics obtained throughout the five-year period will determine if, or when, they will be requested for approval.





STAFFING CONCEPTS FOR CONSIDERATION

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Licensed veterinary technician, community programs

This position will coordinate and oversee public low-cost vaccine clinics, which currently serve over 600 customers a year, with the intention of doubling that volume. This individual will oversee the CARE (Companion Animal Resource Effort) program, a privately funded resource, assisting low income pet owners with one-time grants to retain their pets, and coordinate educational programs for animal professionals (veterinarians, trainers, behaviorists, technicians) in Loudoun County to create a local support system through animal-related businesses. Additionally, they will coordinate and provide surgical support for sterilization clinics and cases referred from local veterinary clinics as part of an effort to reduce the population of unowned pets, and reduce the number of animals surrendered to LCAS for economic reasons. As, presently the United States is suffering from a profound veterinary shortage, with veterinary vacancies expected to be around 16% by the year 2030, this position will likely be a priority request.

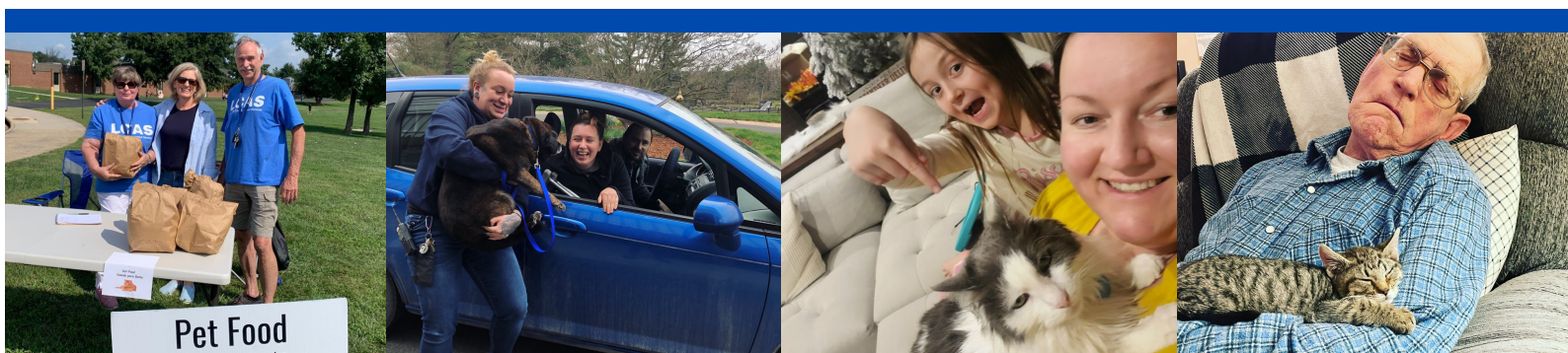


Pet Placement Specialist(s)

In Fiscal Year 2022, 61% of cats and dogs received from Loudoun County residents, as strays or owner surrenders, arrive with additional medical or behavioral needs, which, in many cases exceed the Department's ability to address. Typically, those with complex needs will have longer lengths of stay, and many require extensive or ongoing care, training or rehabilitation. Animal sheltering in the United States has seen this trend commonly in communities where spay/neuter is prevalent, but costs of caring for these animals is growing exponentially. From this development, many animal sheltering organizations have shifted their focus from intake-kennel-adoption, to developing services to empower people to keep their pets.

Pet retention-focused services will be critical to program stabilization efforts, and will enable the department to establish initiatives to support pets in their homes, reducing intakes and preserving the human-animal bond.

Pet Placement Specialist would be a new position, proposed as part of a career ladder for Animal Care Technicians. In order to manage the large volume of foot traffic at the LCAS facility, tasks must be more effectively distributed among staff, including adding new positions. Interaction with, and support of this volume of customers is not sustainable for animal care technicians or customer service specialists, and reducing adoption counseling responsibilities from these other roles, and providing a more skilled adoption counseling process would allow for a more positive customer experience. Currently, wait times for customer service during high traffic days can reach one hour, and on low-staff days, animal care technicians are routinely accruing overtime to complete necessary daily tasks after hours. Additionally, these positions can support the revenue-generating animal transfer program, allowing for a significant amount of cost-offset for these roles.



STAFFING CONCEPTS FOR CONSIDERATION



Humane Education Coordinator

This position would be a duplicate of the existing humane education coordinator classification. However, adding an additional person to this role would allow the department to meet the tremendous demands for community programming, and expand revenue generating programs, such as camps and specialty classes to recover approximately 70% of the costs of adding the position.



Humane Law Enforcement Officers (HLEOs)

While the county is anticipating population stabilization over the next decade, the humane law enforcement division is still in need of increased staffing, as additional officers have not been requested for this team since 2015. Responses to calls regarding wildlife, livestock and companion animals are increasingly complex, with greater severity seen in animal cruelty investigations, while a spike in cases has been identified involving temporary emergency housing of animals and, also, juvenile perpetrators, leading to a greater scope of work for officers to perform. However, even when call volume is steady, the team of 11 officers frequently struggles to maintain 24/7 coverage over 522 square miles. The possibility of a wildlife specialist on the humane law enforcement team is also under consideration, as issues with wild animals are frequent points of concern for residents, and wildlife-related calls make up approximately 28% of all officer responses. Ensuring adequate staffing of this team is vital to ensure optimal public safety, animal welfare, judicial process and progressive law enforcement initiatives, while preserving the wellbeing of those serving in a high-stress role.

Dispatcher

It is projected that additional dispatcher coverage will be needed to provide consistent service after facility hours, while humane law enforcement officers are still on duty responding to public calls for service. An additional dispatcher was last requested, and granted, in 2016. At this time, an average of 15 hours of Animal Services' regular (in addition to on-call) coverage are handled each week by the Emergency Communications Center. This impacts messaging and the department's ability to maintain a high percentage of calls resolved through specialized technical education, rather than direct officer response. Additionally, for 30.5 hours per week, only one dispatcher is available to answer calls, which frequently creates an additional burden on sworn officers to cover their breaks and leave usage, and sends a number of calls to voicemail, while the one call taker on duty is on the other line.





CONCLUSION



The Loudoun County Animal Services Strategic Plan was formulated to consider all aspects of our County's needs and interests in Animal Services. In a post-COVID world, national trends in animal welfare have taken a sharp turn, with many organizations across the country suffering from longer length of stay, higher rates of euthanasia, and staffing shortages. LCAS has successfully been able to navigate the relocation to a new facility during this challenging time without experiencing many of the hardships that threaten the animal welfare profession. As leaders in the industry, Loudoun County Animal Services seeks to continue to weather storms that may come our way, prioritizing staff learning and support to best serve our community, and their ever-evolving needs. Just as animal welfare is a community initiative, so too will be the execution of this plan, as we work through the goals, constantly assessing our evolution and priorities with those we serve and support. We look forward to all that the next five years will bring, as LCAS steps into a new era of progress alongside our residents- both human and animal.

