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Pinellas County, FL



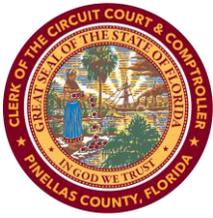
INVESTIGATION OF A VIOLATION ISSUED BY PINELLAS COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES



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REPORT NO. 2026-06
FEBRUARY 27, 2026



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February 27, 2026

Barry Burton, County Administrator

The Division of Inspector General's Public Integrity Unit has completed an investigation of the following allegation:

- The Respondent did not follow appropriate policies, procedures, and/or ordinances when they investigated an animal cruelty complaint, resulting in the issuance of a violation.

Based on documented evidence, facts, and other evidentiary information, such as testimony, we concluded that the allegation was **unfounded**; it was proved to be false, or there was no credible evidence to support it.

The recommendations presented in this report may not be all-inclusive of areas where improvement may be needed; however, we believe implementation of the recommendations will strengthen the current internal controls.

We appreciate the cooperation shown by the staff of Pinellas County Animal Services during the course of this investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melissa Dondero
Inspector General/Chief Audit Executive

cc: The Honorable Chair and Members of the Board of County Commissioners
Matthew Spoor, Assistant County Administrator
Jennifer Renner, Director, Animal Services Department
Ken Burke, CPA, Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| ACO | Animal Control Officer |
| Agent | Resident Agent |
| Animal Services | Pinellas County Animal Services Department |
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| Citizen | Concerned Citizen |
| County | Pinellas County |
| Director | Animal Services Director |
| DP | Domesticated Pig |
| IG | Division of Inspector General |
| LPD | Largo Police Department |
| Photo | Photograph |
| Report | Largo Police Department Investigation Report |
| Rescue | Pig Rescue |
| Respondent | Former Animal Control Officer 2 |
| SA | State Attorney |
| SAO | Office of the State Attorney, Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida |
| Shelter | Animal Shelter |
| SOP | Standard Operating Procedures |

INTRODUCTION

Predicate

The Division of Inspector General (IG) received a request from the Pinellas County (County) Administrator to conduct an independent investigation into the issuance of an animal cruelty violation by the County's Animal Services Department (Animal Services) to a local animal shelter (Shelter) due to concerns that the matter was not handled appropriately.

Allegations

The Division of Inspector General's Public Integrity Unit investigated the following allegation:

- The Respondent did not follow appropriate policies, procedures, and/or ordinances when they investigated an animal cruelty complaint, resulting in the issuance of a violation.

To determine whether the allegation was substantiated, we reviewed policies, procedures, and appropriate records. We also interviewed staff and other parties, as needed. Our investigation was conducted in compliance with the Quality Standards for Investigations found within the *Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General* as published by the Association of Inspectors General and *The Florida Inspectors General Standards Manual* from The Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation.

Background

Animal Services duties include safeguarding the public's and animals' health and safety. They provide services to County residents related to education, public outreach, and adopting a pet or finding a lost one. They are responsible for enforcing current ordinances and laws regarding the treatment of animals. In addition, their website offers permit applications for individuals who want to become breeders.

Per Florida Statutes 828.03 Agents of counties, societies, etc., may prosecute violators:

“(1) Any county or any society or association for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals, organized under the laws of this state, may appoint agents for the purpose of investigating violations of any of the provisions of this chapter or any other law of the state for the purpose of protecting children and animals or preventing any act of cruelty thereto.”

Pursuant to the County Code of Ordinances, Sec. 14-46. - Enforcement of article:

“(a) The department of animal services is designated as the agency of the board of county commissioners to implement, enforce, and administer the provisions of this article [Chapter 14 Animals, Article II Animal Services.”

On July 10, 2025, a County citizen delivered a five-year-old domesticated pig (DP) to the Shelter. Table 1 below details the Shelter’s medical notes for the DP during its stay at the Shelter.

| Date | Description |
|-----------------------|---|
| 7/10/2025 | A citizen delivered the DP to the Shelter on behalf of the owner. |
| 7/12/2025 | Staff noted the DP had an overgrown right tusk and hooves. |
| 7/14/2025 | Staff were uncertain if the DP was eating. |
| 7/15/2025 | Day 1 of 3 for appetite monitor. |
| 7/16/2025 | The DP was limping, not eating and sunburnt. Management discussed quality of life. The DP did not eat food and staff gave them apples, of which, they ate two. |
| 7/17/2025 | The DP was lying in a dirt pile and food was multiple feet away; the DP could not get up to eat the food. Staff took the food bowl and held it in front of the DP, who ate right away. Staff gave the DP Rimadyl for limping. |
| 7/18/2025 - 7/24/2025 | Staff gave the DP additional food and Rimadyl. |

Table 1- Shelter Medical Notes

On July 24, 2025, the resident agent (Agent) of a pig rescue (Rescue) arrived at the Shelter and removed the DP from the Shelter’s custody¹. On July 27, 2025, Animal Services received a complaint from a concerned citizen (Citizen) regarding the DP and the treatment the DP received at the Shelter. On July 28, 2025, an Animal Services employee notified the Citizen that Animal Services could not investigate because the DP had relocated to the Rescue². On July 29, 2025, the Agent provided Animal Services with photographs (photos) of the DP when they arrived at the Shelter and after they relocated the DP to the Rescue. Picture 1 below is one of the photos the Agent provided to Animal Services from the day they rescued the DP.



Picture 1 - DP

¹ The Largo Police Department report includes notes from a Shelter staff member indicating a rescue was contacted.

² During our investigation, the Animal Services Director stated Animal Services has the authority to investigate after an animal’s relocation and the employee was notified they gave incorrect information to the Citizen.

The Agent reiterated the need for an investigation. On July 29, 2025, Animal Services opened an "Abuse" case regarding the Shelter's care of the DP while in the Shelter's custody. On July 31, 2025, a former Animal Control Officer 2 (ACO) for Animal Services (Respondent) initiated their investigation into the animal cruelty allegations against the Shelter. Animal Services issued a violation to the Shelter for "Cruelty to Animals," with a date of July 16, 2025³.

Pursuant to § 828.27(d), Florida Statutes, Animals: Cruelty; Sales; Animal Enterprise Protection:

"Cruelty" means any act of neglect, torture, or torment that causes unjustifiable pain or suffering of an animal."

³ The date used for the violation is the date the Shelter noted the DP's sunburn in their medical report.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Division of Inspector General uses the following terminology for the conclusion of fact/findings:

- **Substantiated** – An allegation is substantiated when there is sufficient evidence to conclude the allegation is true.
- **Unsubstantiated** – An allegation is unsubstantiated when there is insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation.
- **Unfounded** – An allegation is unfounded when it is proved to be false or there is no credible evidence to support it.
- **Justified** – An allegation is justified when it is proved to be true. However, the actions were appropriate in the circumstances.

Allegation #1. The Respondent did not follow appropriate policies, procedure, or ordinances when they investigated an animal cruelty complaint, resulting in the issuance of a violation.

We obtained the Animal Services standard operating procedures (SOPs), which include the following:

“10. Cruelty investigations will be managed in accordance with the following policies:

b. If conditions do not warrant immediate removal of the animal(s) from the scene or environment, the investigating ACO 2 will work with the animal owner on a plan of action to correct the violations that were found...

d. When conditions warrant the immediate removal of the animal(s) from the scene or environment, the investigating ACO 2 will attempt to gain the cooperation of the owner to relinquish ownership of the animals to PCAS.”

Since the SOPs do not specify procedures for investigating alleged abuse after the animal has been relocated, as noted in the Background section of this report, Animal Services staff initially told the Agent they could not investigate the complaint. After Animal Services management reviewed the complaint, they determined Animal Services could investigate the complaint.

During our interview with the Director of Animal Services (Director), the Director indicated that in practice, Animal Services staff should follow their SOPs consistently no matter the location of the animal. Animal Services cannot issue a violation without appropriate evidence to substantiate the complaint.

The SOPs dictate that the investigator will perform the following:

- Review the complaint and any evidence provided by the complainant.
- Collect data.
- Contact the rescue shelter and any veterinarian involved with the animal.
- Inspect the site where the animal cruelty allegedly occurred.
- Interview staff at the site where the animal cruelty allegedly occurred.

Per the Director, the Respondent was dedicated to their job and went above and beyond, taking it upon themselves to complete the training necessary to advance their career. In 2022, the Respondent began their career with Animal Services as an ACO 1, in 2024, was promoted to ACO 2, and in March 2025, achieved expert investigator status. Animal Services supervisors do not recommend promotions for employees who do not follow policies and procedures.

The Director never received complaints or had any issues with the Respondent and indicated they received only one disciplinary action in 2024 for tardiness. According to the Director, the Respondent left their employment with Animal Services in September 2025 because they moved out of the area.

During our review of the Respondent's personnel file, we noted the Respondent previously worked at the Shelter from August 2018 through March 2019 as a Foster Coordinator. However, the file indicated the Director did not participate in the Respondent's interviews before they were hired. The Director stated they did not know the Respondent had previously worked at the Shelter until a short time before the IG's interview.

We reviewed the Animal Services Case View Report, which supports the issued violation. Per the Animal Services Director, the Respondent's supervisor was involved in this case, which we confirmed during our review of the Case View Report. The Respondent visited the case address in an effort to speak to the Shelter Director of Animal Welfare, who directed the Respondent to the Shelter Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The CEO took the Respondent to the pen and pasture where the DP was housed. The Respondent noted the pen met shelter requirements and was the only shade the DP had access to. The CEO told the Respondent that they could monitor the DP from their office window and saw the DP moving from the pasture to the pen as needed. The Shelter medical notes indicated a sunburn was noticed on July 16, 2025, and that the DP was not getting up to eat, but when food was brought to the DP, the DP ate all of it, which indicated mobility issues. The Respondent asked the CEO why the DP was not confined to the pen at that time. The CEO stated she could see the DP move around without issues.

During our interview with the CEO, they indicated the Shelter had never had an investigation or a violation under the CEO's tenure. The CEO was not present when the Respondent arrived at the Shelter to initiate the investigation. When the Respondent made contact with the CEO, the Respondent indicated the situation surrounding the DP was bad and the Respondent wanted to see where the Shelter kept the DP during their stay. The

Respondent did not listen to the CEO and accused the CEO of lying. The only other Shelter staff member who had contact with the Respondent was the staff member who escorted the Respondent to the CEO. The CEO was not aware of the Animal Services SOPs for investigations.

When the Animal Services investigation started, the CEO was not aware that the Respondent had worked at the Shelter previously. Shelter staff alerted the CEO of that information after the investigation was in progress.

During our investigation, we learned that the Largo Police Department (LPD) had investigated the Shelter for animal cruelty related to the DP's treatment while at the Shelter. We contacted the LPD to discuss its investigation, and obtained their investigation report (Report). The Report detailed the LPD's activity during its investigation. Table 2 below details some of the activities LPD performed or coordinated, as reflected in the Report.

| Date | Activity |
|------------|---|
| 08/05/2025 | Initiated the investigation. |
| 08/20/2025 | Contacted the Office of the State Attorney, Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida (SAO). |
| 08/26/2025 | Submitted subpoenas to the SAO for Shelter staff emails. |
| 10/03/2025 | Submitted subpoena request to the SAO for the DP's medical records. |
| 10/14/2025 | Submitted paperwork to the SAO for a search warrant for the Shelter's CEO's cell phone records. |
| 11/11/2025 | The SAO advised it was updating its search warrant language to specify the Shelter, and not the CEO individually. |
| 11/18/2025 | Received the DP's medical records. |
| 11/20/2025 | The SAO assigned the case to a State Attorney (SA). |
| 12/09/2025 | Ready to arrest the CEO; however, a meeting with the SA is scheduled for 12/11/2025 as a courtesy. |
| 12/11/2025 | The SAO advised it would not be filing any charges against the Shelter CEO. |
| 12/16/2025 | The SAO clarified the no file (no filing of charges) was for the CEO. The SAO did not indicate whether the SAO would include the Shelter in the no file. Because the SAO did not file charges, they would not issue the search warrant for the CEO's cell phone records or the subpoena for staff emails. |
| 01/07/2026 | Closed the investigation. The SAO had not provided the documentation for the no file. |

Table 2 - LPD Activities

We contacted the SAO to inquire why they did not file charges against the CEO or the Shelter. The SAO explained that the evidence needed to support a criminal conviction is a higher standard, beyond a reasonable doubt, than the evidence necessary for a civil matter,

a preponderance of the evidence. This was the basis for the SAO's decision not to prosecute.

During our interview with the Respondent, they indicated they left Animal Services to move out of the area. They confirmed they worked at the Shelter for six months, approximately eight or nine years prior, as a Foster Coordinator. The Respondent stated they interacted with the CEO when it involved fostering animals. The Respondent stated the Shelter, "did not feel like a good fit for me," and that led to her seeking employment elsewhere.

Per the Respondent, prior to initiating an investigation, the Respondent reviews all documentation received by Animal Services with the complaint, which may include text messages and photos, so they are familiar with the situation when they arrive at a site. The Respondent stated Animal Services cannot issue an animal cruelty violation until certain criteria are met.

Per the Respondent, ACOs are assigned investigations based on their location in the County. The investigation into the Shelter was not an emergency because the DP was no longer in the Shelter's care. After reviewing the DP's medical report from the Shelter, the Respondent determined when staff at the Shelter stopped caring for the DP. The DP's medical records reflected the Shelter did not treat the DP's sunburn documented on July 16, 2025. Since there is no documentation of medications given to the DP for their sunburn, it is unclear if the DP received any before being moved to the Rescue on July 24, 2025.

According to the Respondent, any clinic, rescue, or shelter tracks medication administered to an animal. The Respondent indicated it would be negligent not to document the treatments, as some medications can cause adverse reactions when administered within a certain time of one another. The Respondent visited the Shelter to speak with the staff who cared for the DP, as they would have knowledge of the DP's treatments while at the Shelter. The Respondent wanted to ask if the DP received any other treatment that the staff did not document. The Shelter staff directed the Respondent to the Shelter's Animal Services supervisor, who then directed them to speak with the CEO. The Respondent stated they were unable to talk with any other staff members at the Shelter, including the staff who cared for the DP.

We contacted the Agent for the Rescue to inquire if they would provide an updated photo of the DP. The Agent provided Picture 2 below, taken on February 11, 2026.



Picture 2 - The DP on 2/11/2026

We determined the allegation was **unfounded**. Although Animal Services does not have specific procedures for conducting an investigation after an animal is relocated, they follow their SOPs regardless of whether the animal is present or at another location. The evidence gathered during the Respondent's investigation warranted the issuance of the violation against the Shelter. We determined the Respondent followed appropriate policies, procedures and/or ordinances resulting in the correct issuance of the violation.

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS

1. Animal Services Does Not Have A Formal Process For Investigations After An Animal Is Relocated.

Animal Services does not have a formalized policy or procedure for investigating animal cruelty after an animal's relocation.

Pursuant to Animal Services SOPs:

"5. Cruelty complaints that are designated as urgent priority complaints will be investigated without delay, and on the day received...."

7. Cruelty complaints that are designated as high priority complaints will be investigated within 24hrs from when they were reported...."

10. Cruelty investigations will be managed in accordance with the following policies:

b. If conditions do not warrant immediate removal of the animal(s) from the scene or environment, the investigating ACO 2 will work with the animal owner on a plan of action to correct the violations that were found...."

d. When conditions warrant the immediate removal of the animal(s) from the scene or environment, the investigating ACO 2 will attempt to gain the cooperation of the owner to relinquish ownership of the animals to PCAS."

Currently, Animal Services SOPs do not provide procedures related to investigations after the animal's removal. Without appropriate procedures in place, there could be inconsistencies with investigations after an animal's relocation.

We Recommend Management:

- A. Update Animal Services SOPs to include the appropriate steps to take when conducting an investigation after the relocation of an animal.
- B. Provide training to Animal Services employees on the updated SOPs after they have been updated.

Management Response and Action Plan:

- A. **Management Concur.**

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** Jennifer Renner, Director, Animal Services Department
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** February 28, 2026

B. Management Concurs.

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** Jennifer Renner, Director, Animal Services Director
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** February 28, 2026



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KEN BURKE, CPA

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