

Animal Cruelty Investigations Advisory Board

October 29, 2024, 10 AM, Via Google Meet

Meeting Minutes/Notes

Board Member Attendees

Sally Adams
Pamela Brown
Jennifer Firpo
Erika Holm
John MacCallum
Mary McFaun
JoAnn Nichols
Kelly Price
Thomas “Mike” Scott
Trevor Whipple

Public Attendees

Stacy Ober
Wilda White

I. Introduction of New Board Member

Chair Erika Holm welcomed new board member JoAnn Nichols to the Animal Cruelty Investigations Advisory Board (ACIAB) and invited her to introduce herself to the ACIAB.

JoAnn Nichols said that as a member of the ACIAB, she represents a Humane Society. She works for the Humane Society of Chittenden County. She’s worked with the organization since 2001, although she left for four years, and returned. In total, she’s worked for the Humane Society for about 17 years. Her current position is mostly remote. She works as the organization’s humane investigator, and she does education work as well.

Most ACIAB members had previously met JoAnn Nichols and introduced themselves to JoAnn Nichols.

Kelly Price, who had not previously introduced himself to JoAnn Nichols, introduced himself. Kelly clarified that he was not representing Vermont Fish and Wildlife even though he sometimes shows up in uniform. Kelly said he has been working for the State for 23 years and was offered a position on the board. He said he was a member of many council and boards and was proud to be a member of the ACIAB to assist in any way he can.

II. Replacement of State Vet

Sally Adams inquired about who was going to replace the outgoing state veterinarian, Kristin Haas.

Erika Holm mentioned reaching out to Secretary Anson Tebbets (Agriculture Food and Markets) and the Director of Communications to get a replacement for Dr. Haas to no avail. She stated she will continue to follow up with them to try to get a recommendation to fill the vacant seat.

III. Meeting Minutes

Approval of the July 24 meeting minutes was postponed to the next scheduled meeting to allow all board members an opportunity to review the minutes.

Mary McFaun asked that Act 167, as introduced and as enacted be posted on the ACIAB website.

IV. Job Posting for Director of the Division of Animal Welfare Update

Wilda reported that the job description and posting have been approved by HR and should be soon posted.

There was a discussion of the composition of the interview panel, including potential members such as Trevor Whipple. Erika suggests reaching out to board members for interest in serving on the interview committee.

V. Draft Annual Report

Erika Holm and Sally Adams worked on drafting a report to the legislature that is due on January 15, 2025. Erika noted that she had some comments and questions about the draft that Sally had prepared.

One of the key points of discussion was around the director of animal welfare needing to use Act 167 (the original 64-page version) as a guideline, rather than the 8-page version that was ultimately enacted as Act 167. Erika felt strongly that the new director should rely on the more comprehensive original proposal that the board had worked on.

There was also discussion about maintaining the board's role and access to the legislature, as Mary emphasized the importance of the board continuing to have that direct line of communication, rather than being eliminated.

Erika and Sally agreed to work together to revise the draft report, incorporating feedback from the other board members. This included addressing items from the original board

directives that were not fully addressed in the enacted legislation, such as creating an educational program for offenders and developing a prosecution guide.

Board members also discussed the challenges around the training requirements for humane agents, with Trevor Whipple raising concerns about the lack of resources to develop the necessary training program. Joanne suggested exploring existing training programs like NACA or the New England Animal Control Humane Academy. Joanne mentioned that she and another animal control officer were planning to attend the upcoming NACA conference which she offered to report back on to the board.

Mary McFaun and Kelly Price raised the need to address mental health and domestic violence issues in the composition of the proposed advisory council, which was not included in the final legislation.

Kelly expressed concern that the board's hard work and efforts could end up "fizzling away" if the momentum is not maintained. He emphasized the need to get public support and ensure the necessary funding and resources are allocated, so that the issues they have been working on do not just "get lost again." Kelly wanted to know how the board can keep this work going and ensure it gets properly implemented, as he feels the lack of funding is a key challenge.

VI. Public Comments

Stacy Ober reported that there is a New England Animal Control Humane Academy that offers training in New Hampshire. She suggested this could be a good resource, as it provides training on topics like the Fourth Amendment and search and seizure, which would be important for civilian humane agents who may not have that legal background. Stacy proposed that a combination of the NACA training and tailoring it to Vermont's specific laws could potentially satisfy the training requirement without the board having to develop an entirely new program from scratch.

When Erika asked for more details on the organization, Stacy provided the website address <https://www.acoanh.com/neacha2023>.

Stacy then went on to caution that based on her experience covering the New England region, she knows Maine has been having trouble getting their animal control officers certified and recertified.

She suggested this was important context, as it shows that even established training programs don't necessarily solve all the challenges around certifying ACOs. Stacy offered to do further research on examples from other states about funding mechanisms or vehicles they have used to support services related to animal cruelty

cases. She felt this type of information could be helpful for the board as they look to address the resource challenges.

VII. Next Steps

1. Erika Holm and Sally to work together on revising the draft report to the legislature:
(a) Incorporate feedback from the board members; (b) ensure the report accurately reflects the board's work and recommendations; and (c) chart a path forward for the new director while maintaining the board's role
2. Erika Holm to send out a Doodle poll to schedule the next board meeting before November 13, 2024.
3. Wilda White to follow up with the Deputy Commissioner to get the details on the job posting for the new director of animal welfare and share the job posting details with the full board
4. Joanne Nichols to provide feedback on the draft report.
5. The board to explore options for the required animal cruelty investigation training, including utilizing existing programs like those offered by NACA and determining how to tailor the training to Vermont's specific needs
6. The board to consider recommending the inclusion of mental health expertise on the proposed advisory council, as suggested by Mary.

VIII. Adjournment

Mike Scott moved to adjourned, Mary McFaun seconded the motion. Motion carried unanimously.