

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Slow Movement By Dept. Of Agriculture Causes St. Croix Animal Shelter To Cease Stray Animal Pickups And Most Animal Control Duties

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ST. CROIX -- Effective on August 7th, 2016, the St. Croix Animal Welfare Center's (SCAWC) contract with the Government of the Virgin Islands for Animal Control duties on the island of St. Croix has expired, forcing the shelter to stop collecting stray animals and cease performing other critical animal control duties, a press release the shelter issued Friday confirms.

Under the contract, the SCAWC was responsible for providing suitable housing for all animals, particularly stray and homeless dogs; the capture and impoundment of animals

running at large, appointing qualified animal control officers, quarantining bite cases, investigation of cruelty, issuing of dog licenses, adoption of homeless pets and a humane education program, among other duties. The 2015 contract allocated only one quarter of the projected cost to carry out these duties.

According to the release, in a meeting on St. Thomas early this year, the SCAWC clearly expressed the inability to perform the duties outlined in the contract for the payment allocated. A detailed cost estimate for the scope of work for stray animals only (not including owner surrendered animals that make up approximately ½ of the shelter's intake) assuming a 44% lifesaving rate was \$485,000. A small portion of the requested funds was to improve and expand existing enclosures that are currently unsafe for holding dangerous dogs. Safe holding areas are particularly critical as the VIPD has just assigned a full time detective to investigate cases of animal cruelty and neglect.

Additional issues with the contract include the absence of animal wardens, who under the department of agriculture, would be authorized to enforce existing laws relating to animal regulation and rabies control and the humane education program, which prior to 2015 was funded entirely by a private donor.

The SCAWC is a private, non-profit organization that depends on donations to cover the majority of operational costs. In many ways the animal control contract, with the current allocated funds, conflicts with the center's mission, as the contract requires the center to house all stray but fails to provide the financial support for a live outcome for impounded animals, according to the release. SCAWC says it is uncomfortable asking donors to subsidize what should be a government responsibility. Over the past 12 months the SCAWC has doubled its lifesaving rate, has offered free and low-cost spay/neuter and veterinary care and continues to expand this program as well as plans to open a second flea market on the west end of the island.

The Department of Agriculture is currently withholding monies owed to the SCAWC for work already completed, because a new contract has yet to be signed. The SCAWC is attempting to remedy the discrepancy by offering the government a limited scope contract with reasonable duties in exchange for allocated funds or pressing for a substantial increase in funding, the release adds.

As the only animal shelter on the island of St. Croix, the SCAWC's activities are critical and reach far beyond the scope of animal welfare. Abundance of stray animals negatively effects tourism, and poses a risk to human health and safety. Furthermore, violence towards animals has been well established as an indicator of future violence towards humans, according to the release.

Effective immediately, the SCAWC no longer will pick up stray animals, nor perform most other animal control duties for the island of St. Croix. All requests for assistance in this regard should be directed to the VI Department of Agriculture at 778-0997. The low-cost veterinary clinic (including the feral cat program) and adoption center will remain open. The SCAWC looks forward to a speedy resolution of these issues.