

Victorian Dog Rescue & Resource Group Inc.

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Submission from Victorian Dog Rescue & Resource Group Inc to the RSPCA Enquiry

Victorian Dog Rescue, a Community Fostercare Network, has been operating since 2006, and as a grass roots operation is very aware of what the public perceives to be the RSPCA'S role, and even more aware of the public perception of its inability to fulfil that role.

On the one hand we have little respect for the RSPCA's role in animal cruelty law enforcement and the inadequate way they attempt to deal with this; and conversely we see that their reputation suffers because there is no way that they can comprehensively carry out the role expected of them. We note Animals Australia is being seen as proactive and taking over the role formerly mandated to the RSPCA because the RSPCA has been burdened with an impossible obligation.

The RSPCA may be attempting to update their policies in the more general companion animal welfare area but they have lost community respect. For each person that they say they cannot assist, or who is left watching an abandoned or neglected dog, they have lost the respect and financial support of that person and their circle, most likely for their lifetime. Views change slowly but then are difficult to change back again. Compound this by thousands of voices. The RSPCA through its poor standing in the area of animal cruelty has lost overall community support.

As groups firmly based in the community and respected by that community we have very many emails and phone calls from distraught members of the public saying they have contacted the RSPCA to no avail. One we particularly remember is the woman who had been feeding the neighbouring dog who was told to leave it to starve and when emaciated enough she should contact them again.

We are looking at this purely from a companion animal perspective but this is compounded by the more public failures of the RSPCA. What we are now seeing is the same effect as happened before when Melbourne's largest shelter were killing two-thirds of their dogs. Individuals would call to say they had found a stray dog or cat, and say – but don't tell me to take it there because I won't. They will keep the dog/cat rather than put that animal in the appropriate place, that is a pound, for the owner to find.

Now we have the same calls asking us to help neglected, tethered and abused dogs: ' But the RSPCA won't help so I am going to have to do something myself.' Inadequate laws and enforcement lead people to follow their own moral imperatives; that if something is wrong and cruel and there is no appropriate legal action available they will act accordingly. Hence the activism that almost alone led to promised reforms in puppy farms.

Companion animals legally are property but this is not how the majority of the public see them. The RSPCA has failed in its enforcement role, and we have on the ground experience that leads us to agree

with the Lawyers for Animals submission that this section of the RSPCA mandate should be handed on to the police. Also in fairness to the RSPCA the police are trained to deal with the unsavoury people, death threats and violence that can be associated with this role. And the public perceives the arrival of the police as more serious than that the arrival of a RSPCA inspector.

The review should consider the feasibility of pet ownership licences to track the history of a person. If a person is found guilty of cruelty their licence to have a dog or cat should simply be cancelled. These are the areas that the RSPCA in their role as a protector of animals should be using their 'clout' to bring about. Yet another enquiry into a specific section of companion animal welfare will do little unless real changes are mooted.

The RSPCA has shown a reluctance to deal with Council staff and the cruelty and disrespect of life that abounds especially in rural pounds. The shooting of kittens of Mildura some years ago is a conspicuous example of a total lack of adequate follow through despite newspaper publicity, with Dr Hugh Wirth on the radio saying it had been years since animals had been shot in a pound. This led to a feeling of total incredulity that the then President of the RSPCA could be so out of touch with the state-sanctioned cruelty occurring in pounds throughout Victoria.

All we can conclude is that the RSPCA has deliberately closed its eyes for years to actual happenings, or that they do not feel it appropriate for them to 'take on' a council.

An individual that is aware of an animal that is being mistreated should be able to comfortably report it without feeling that there is a political agenda or a lack of concern.

The failure of the RSPCA Inspectorate is damaging the reputation of the RSPCA as a whole. If the RSPCA were to acknowledge their inability to fulfil their responsibilities in this area and to support an initiative to hand this role on to a specially appointed police unit, this may in some measure redeem them to concerned members of the public, and allow them to regain the position they should hold in the community.

In summary the RSPCA has failed in its role to protect abused companion animals, without it being wholly their fault and giving them more powers will not solve this problem, A new approach is required. A police unit dedicated to companion animal welfare, particularly when there is now a known correlation between animal abusers and human abuse, is the logical step.