**Commissioners Lovette, Stevens, Frasier, Thrift, Bowen, Gilliard, and Walden:**

**My name is Rebecca Needham, and I run The Underground Tailroad or the “outside, uncontracted agency” that is mentioned in your Mid-Month Liberty County BOC Meeting. To be honest with you, I had not planned on writing, but I’m forced to do so due to myself and my organization being grossly misrepresented and misquoted during your meeting. \*\*\*I respectfully request that you all read this email in full and mark these corrections in your county record.\*\*\***

**Mr. Brown states in his presentation that I stopped networking the cats and dogs at Liberty County because you were going to euthanize animals (specifically “Honeybadger”, the dog in question). This is absolutely not true. Furthermore, an associate of mine who recently met with the new AC Director, Mr. Marrero, informed me that he was told I would not network Liberty County Animal Control unless I had a guarantee that no animal would be euthanized. This is another untruth. I stopped networking Liberty County Animal Control after 2 years because you switched from the best practice of “euthanizing when space is needed” to “euthanizing after x days no matter how much space is available”.**

**Let me tell you a little bit about myself: I graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in English and Economics after studying at both Connecticut College and the University of Edinburgh. Immediately after graduating, I entered the banking industry and spent several years in compliance, specifically bank audits and policy/procedure writing and review. I am a strong advocate of properly written policies and procedures. There is a good way to tell if a policy or procedure is clear or detailed enough. Ask yourselves this question: if something happened to every single staff member, and you had to bring in a new staff, could they run the facility after reading these policies? I have read the new Standard Operating Procedures, and the euthanasia section is incredibly vague and just states: “Animals that have been impounded for a period of over ten (12) calendar days without identification or twelve (14) calendar days with identification, and have not been claimed by the owner or taken by a rescue group, may be euthanized.”. Firstly, in order for these procedures to be transparent and traceable, it should state who wrote them, who edited them, and who approved them with corresponding dates. It is apparent that no one edited them because the written and numerical dates do not match. Secondly, what does “may” mean? Who determines this? How do they determine this? In the time of Covid when SO MANY community members are suffering with jobs, finances, and illness, your policies and procedures need to be buttoned up tight so that if someone comes in to claim their animal and it was euthanized, you have a valid, written policy to back you up.**

**Let me tell you a little bit more about myself: I pride myself on collaborating with fellow rescuers and animal control staff to make the best decisions for the animals they intake. Severe medical cases should absolutely be euthanized, and we have had those cases. I’ve had members of your community pick up injured strays and ask for my opinion/assistance, and I have given them the advice of “take to animal control and ask for euthanasia”. Euthanasia is also appropriate for highly aggressive dogs.  We have had them at both Liberty and Long County, and the suggested outcome was euthanasia rather than having the animal sit. Here is the difference: you need to have a properly written procedure to go by to make these decisions. If Honeybadger was truly that aggressive, the staff should have said “this dog is aggressive, and she will be euthanized after the mandatory state hold time”. This did not happen. The staff originally said she was aggressive and that no videos would be taken unless a contracted group sent someone. So, a contracted group sent someone. That individual stayed with Honeybadger for 20 minutes or so outside of her cage (the staff refused entry), and she was not aggressive; she even calmly sniffed the “Animal Control Dog” (a Chihuahua that lives at Animal Control with the staff) with no reaction. After that visit, the staff updated Honeybadger’s notes to “getting better!!!”. They even posted new videos of her calmly accepting treats straight from the staff’s fingers through the kennel bars. The case has also been made that “no one tagged her after 17 days”. That is true! I only tag dogs when I have a rescue commitment, and I had not even started to network Honeybadger individually to rescues yet. I had just gotten Peggy Sue into rescue: a super friendly dog that came in the same day as Honeybadger and had also been there for 17 days. Here’s the thing: it takes time to network cats and dogs. Some animals we get out the same day or within days. Others take more time (especially the bully breeds because there are so many and only certain rescues pull them).**

**My group, The Underground Tailroad, networks the cats and dogs of Liberty County Animal Control (previously), Long County Animal Control, the Jesup Pound, and Fort Stewart Animal Control to almost 100 local rescues. In two years, we have gotten 3162 animals into rescue. To give perspective, we brought the Liberty County Animal Control euthanasia count from 292 cats and dogs killed in 2018 to 57 cats and dogs killed in 2019. We not only network the animals, but we coordinate the transport from your Animal Control to the rescue; your animal control never had to transport any of our animals. And we always networked using the intake photos from the website and only asked for further photos/videos if a rescue expressed interest. We are a TEAM across these counties, and we triage appropriately: we get the puppies/kittens/injured animals out ASAP and then focus on getting animals out from the facilities with the least available space. Most weeks, we move 50-75 animals (or more) into rescue. When Liberty County Animal Control started pushing “final out” or “kill dates” when there was plenty of space available, I had to stop networking other facilities with MORE animals (and animals that had been there LONGER) so that the Liberty County animals did not die. That is not ethically or strategically correct.**

**In addition to incorrectly stating why I stopped networking your animal control, the presentation also had the following errors that need to be remedied:**

**1.            Your animal control Medical Advisor that was recently assigned (she did not evaluate or treat any of the animals I networked the past two years), is Dr. PEEPLES, not Dr. Peters**

**2.            Mr. Brown mentions that you “only” have 7 staff members; this is not a small number as implied. The Jesup Pound has 3 officers (two of which double as police officers), and Long County Animal Control has 2 officers; both facilities bring in a comparable amount of animals.**

**3.            Mr. Brown mentions several times that you do everything you can to adopt out these animals. Liberty County Animal Control DOES NOT adopt out any animals. You do not allow public adoptions or members of the public to enter (unless picking up an owned animal). You only allow contracted rescues to pull animals from you.**

**4.            Mr. Brown mentions several times how your “hold times” have gotten longer with the new policy. This is perhaps the most upsetting point.  Longer or long hold times are not good for the animals. The point of a hold time is to give potential owners a chance to find their animal (although for certain animals, like cats and kittens, the reclaim rate is insanely low), but also allow rescues to pull the animal quickly so they are not just sitting at Animal Control (and exposed to illness since you provide no vaccinations). Hold times should be as short as possible to get the animals OUT. However, the end of a hold time does not mean it’s time for the animal to die. It just means an animal can leave. We are debating the merit of your EUTHANASIA policy, not your HOLD policy.**

**5.            Mr. Brown mentions several times that the staff is medicating the animals and/or providing medical care; this has been the case since I started networking and it is wrong/borders on illegal. Here are some examples (and all of these examples have vet documentation):**

**A.            A severely emaciated dog came into animal control and was immediately given a kill time in 2 hours/the end of the day due to condition, but the staff still administered “ear medicine” for an ear infection. Why waste time or funds on medicating a dog that will either be rescue pulled or killed in 2 hours? Why bother putting in ear medicine when you’re not a vet and have no idea if the infection is treatable via the medicine you have (ear infections come in many types and need specific medicine). The receiving rescue is a vet herself and informed us that the dog had NO ear infection.**

**B.            A cat with a wound came into animal control and an officer “sutured” the wound. The receiving rescue who, once again, is a vet, said that the wound got sutured without proper cleaning, and it ended up being worse because it was sutured with dirty fur inside.**

**C.            A cat with severe wounds (spine exposed) was brought in and needed to leave that day or would be euthanized. The staff sedated the cat and washed out the wounds/soaked the cat with water. Once again, why waste the time or funds to do this when the cat will either be euthanized or leaving in a couple hours? The receiving vet stated that she was “shocked” at the amount of sedation drugs given, and the fact that the cat was wet; she said the wounds did not concern her, but the amount of sedation and low body temperature from cleaning the wounds nearly killed the cat.**

**I’m sure that the staff meant well on the above examples, but the end result is a waste of county funds for medical supplies that the staff is not legally supposed to be administering in the manner they are doing so.**

**6.            Mr. Brown mentioned heart worm testing, FIV/Felv testing, and buying a microscope for fecal tests. Once again, all this does is waste more taxpayer money. These tests do not help the animals medically. If heartworm positive, you’re not treating the heartworms. And, if you’re deworming everyone at intake, you’re killing parasites (no need to test). Return your expensive microscope and give the animals vaccines. Vaccines costs a couple dollars each, and they protect the animals and stop infectious disease outbreaks. The number one reason a rescue will not take animals from you is that you do not vaccinate.**

**7.            Mr. Brown mentioned that animals had been rescue tagged for over a month without pick up. This is not true. NONE of my rescues took that long to pick up. The only exception was when the Humane Society in Savannah tagged some dogs, and then they shut down for Covid for over a month. They informed Animal Control that they would take the dogs as soon as they opened back up, and they did. And these dogs didn’t go to another rescue sooner because other rescues were also closed and not accepting.**

**8.            Mr. Brown mentioned that it’s not good for a dog to stay in a kennel for too long. Most of the rescues taking these dogs are kennel based. Liberty Humane Shelter is kennel based. The Humane Society in Savannah, another rescue who pulled a lot of your dogs, is kennel based. In fact, one of the questions they were always sure to ask me is “how do they do in their kennel?” since they want dogs that would thrive in that type of environment.**

**9.            Mr. Brown mentioned that they hope to tackle the issue of intake and try to get LESS intake. That is a phenomenal idea, and an idea I emailed him specifically about months ago when a colleague was in your area doing shelter evaluations to do just that: help animal controls tackle lower intake and provide more community resources. Mr. Brown declined this free evaluation, so the individual only ended up visiting Long County Animal Control and the Jesup Pound.**

**10.          Finally, Mr. Brown mentions that you cannot euthanize based on available kennel space because you could “suddenly fill up”. In the two years I networked your facility, I can remember this happening only once or twice and guess what? When they ran out of kennels, they euthanized for space. And then they had space again! It wasn’t difficult, and it certainly did not present a problem.**

**Mr. Brown is absolutely correct on one thing: it is completely unprofessional to mispresent someone’s intentions and that’s exactly what happened to my words and opinions in this presentation. In future, I would highly suggest that you not tell the public that they are not “allowed” to speak at a Board of Commissioners’ meeting regarding Animal Control because it’s not “business”, but then allow privileged county staff to do just that. The best thing that could have come out of this meeting would have been a public-driven discussion on Animal Control so you could understand all sides of the story and move in a positive, forward direction. Instead, just like Animal Control, the public was not allowed in, and they had to rely on social media, as well as mostly unanswered emails, to attempt to get their opinions noticed. Perhaps the biggest issue is the fact that Mr. Brown thinks that criticisms of Animal Control extend to him and his family, as well as how they treat personal animals. We are all adult enough to know that criticisms of Animal Control are just that: criticisms of a system that needs improvements. After all, nothing in society would progress if everything was deemed “perfect”.**

**Sincerely,**

**Rebecca Needham**