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San Diego Humane Society Provides Update on Large-Scale Animal Rescue in Julian

Hundreds of animals rescued during investigation into severe neglect

SAN DIEGO — San Diego Humane Society (SDHS) officials held a press conference today to provide critical updates on a large-scale rescue and investigation currently unfolding at the Villa Chardonnay property in Julian.

Although the property sits outside the Society's standard jurisdiction, the case was officially transferred from San Diego County Animal Services to SDHS on April 24, 2026, due to the extreme scope of the rescue and complexities stemming from an ongoing bankruptcy proceeding.

Background:

The conditions at Villa Chardonnay have raised concerns for years, prompting involvement from national and local animal welfare agencies. Organizations including [Humane Farming Association](#) (HFA), [Humane World for Animals](#), and [San Diego County Animal Services](#) have made repeated efforts to investigate the property and gain access. Since October of 2025, the HFA has been working with the U.S. Bankruptcy Court and trustee for Villa Chardonnay, Inc. to facilitate a veterinary site visit and inspection of the more than 300 animals located on the 40-acre site. In early April, the HFA provided veterinary documentation that helped SDHS advance its inspection. Working in coordination with these partners, SDHS ultimately collaborated with a bankruptcy trustee to secure access to the property and assess conditions firsthand.



Based on veterinary evidence of severe neglect — including emaciation, untreated injuries and a lack of basic care — SDHS served a search warrant at the Villa Chardonnay property on May 1, 2026. This evidence prompted the bankruptcy trustee to request a legal transfer of the animals, and a judge subsequently granted SDHS full ownership of all animals on the property. This transfer was a critical step that allows SDHS to implement comprehensive medical and long-term care plans for the hundreds of animals involved.

“This is one of the largest and most complex rescues our organization has ever undertaken,” said Jace Huggins, Vice President and Chief of Humane Law Enforcement at San Diego Humane Society. “We are currently managing a 40-acre property to stabilize and rescue hundreds of animals who have suffered from significant deficiencies in care and welfare.”

“It truly is appalling,” said Dr. Gary Weitzman, president and CEO at San Diego Humane Society. “There is no question at all about the neglect, at the very least, that occurred out there. I am very happy that these animals have a new chance at life.”

Scope of the Rescue

Since May 1, teams have been working across the property to rescue hundreds of animals. Current estimates of the total number of animals involved include:

- Approximately 165 horses and several ponies
- More than 300 cats (with an estimated 50-100 still on the property)



- 30 dogs
- Dozens of other animals, including goats, alpacas, pigs, chickens and more.

As of Monday, May 4, 2026, the following animals have been successfully transported to local shelters: 334 cats, 30 dogs, 29 chickens, 8 ducks, 4 geese, 4 turkeys, 3 roosters, 2 peahens, 1 peacock, 2 ravens, 1 crow, 12 goats, 3 pigs and 1 sheep.

The care, assessment, documentation and treatment of horses are ongoing on the property. SDHS is now staffing the property daily with 15-20 team members, which is the necessary staffing level that should have been present on the property all along. A veterinarian has been on-site every day.

Animal Condition and Medical Care

Dr. Zarah Hedge, Chief Medical Officer at SDHS, reported that the majority of animals recovered so far are suffering from severe neglect. Documented conditions include widespread malnutrition, emaciation, untreated open wounds, and contagious infections such as ringworm and giardia. Diagnostic testing has identified numerous cases of giardia, with additional testing ongoing to inform treatment plans.

Difficult Decisions

While the goal is a live outcome for the vast majority of animals, some were in such critical condition that humane euthanasia was necessary to prevent further suffering. This has included: four horses, a pony, a bull experiencing severe medical distress, and one kitten who passed away in care.

To ensure the highest ethical standards, strict protocols are in place requiring multiple veterinarians to confer and agree that euthanasia is the only humane course of action. For large animals, experts from East County Large and Small Animal Practice (ECLAP) are involved. In cases where original owners can be identified, they are being contacted and involved in decision-making.

Reunification Efforts

SDHS has received nearly 100 submissions from individuals who believe their owned animals were boarded or surrendered at the Villa Chardonnay property. Reuniting animals with their original owners is a top priority.

Those seeking reunification are encouraged to complete the form at the top of sdhumane.org/julianrescue. Every animal is being documented and photographed to support identification. SDHS is asking those filling out the forms for patience as the organization works to respond to each inquiry.

Operational Impact and Community Call to Action

This large-scale rescue comes at a time when SDHS is already overcapacity. Community members can support by:

- **Adopting** pets to help create space.
- **Donating** to fund medical care, food and transport for rescued animals.

Partner Acknowledgment

This effort involves collaboration with multiple animal welfare organizations, including:

- San Diego County Animal Services and their CART Teams
- Humane Farming Association
- Pasadena Humane
- Marin Humane
- LA County Animal Care & Control
- East County Large and Small Animal Practice (ECLAP)

This is an active and ongoing investigation. SDHS will continue to provide updates at sdhumane.org/julianrescue.



Today's press conference is available for media use here:

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/cIruRV9nOQ>

Speakers:

- Dr. Gary Weitzman, President & CEO, San Diego Humane Society
- Jace Huggins, Vice President and Chief of Humane Law Enforcement
- Dr. Zarah Hedge, Vice President of Shelter Medicine & Chief Medical Officer
- Dr. Briana Sarvis, Director, County Animal Services

Photos/video of the rescue efforts (on-site care, transport and exams) are available for media use here:

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/mA8NhSn17>

Please note, each file is dated and labeled by day

Photo/video credit for all: San Diego Humane Society

Additional Media Contacts:

For questions about San Diego County Animal Services, please contact County of San Diego Public Safety Communications Officer Chuck Westerheide, Jr. at Chuck.Westerheide@sdcounty.ca.gov.

For questions about Humane Farming Association, please contact Attorney for Humane Farming Association Grace Wainscoat at gwainscoat@greenfirelaw.com / (510) 900-9502 x 709.

About San Diego Humane Society

San Diego Humane Society's scope of social responsibility goes beyond adopting animals. We offer programs that strengthen the human-animal bond, prevent cruelty and neglect, provide medical care, educate the community and serve as a safety net for all pet families. Serving San Diego County since 1880, San Diego Humane Society has campuses in El Cajon, Escondido, Oceanside, Ramona and San Diego. For more information, please visit sdhumane.org.

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