

Top: Moldy cat food is left out for cats to eat at the Redwood City Wag Hotel on Nov. 7, 2021. A former employee explains the cats were often neglected, with fresh food not given regularly. Above: A screenshot of messages between Taylor Soetje and her boss on June 13, 2019. Soetje was in the hospital after being mauled by a dog at the Santa Clara location. Photos provided to the Chronicle

On June 13, 2019, at the Santa Clara location, a pit bull attacked and mauled four employees, according to police records and Cal/OSHA, the state’s workplace safety regulator.

Taylor Soetje, a former head dog trainer at Wag in Santa Clara, was one of those injured in the incident. She said she heard screaming and rushed to the playroom, where she saw a staff member “being dragged by her ankle. He’s just dragging her like a toy and there’s blood everywhere.”

violation of safety standards.

Employees raised concerns

More than six months later, when she returned to work after the attack, Soetje said she learned that Wag hadn’t made significant changes.

“There was never a safety protocol put in place at the locations of the hotels, even after that,” said Soetje. “Just carried on as if nothing happened. There was a little video that barely covered what to do in case of an accident and the advice was to curl up in a ball and wait for help. That was it. I was like, ‘I’m out of here.’ ”

Eight Wag employees told the Chronicle they had asked company leadership to make changes to ensure the safety of pets and people, but management resisted these ideas, they said.

Kris Kates, who was the director of behavior and training for Wag Hotels from 2013 to 2017, said she had conversations with corporate leaders about increasing training for new hires and adding more dog handlers.

“If you hire inexperienced people, you have a level of training you should give them when they are caring for living things, or you hire experienced people that know how to care for living things,” Kates said. “Neither one of those things were happening, and it was becoming evident.”

Kates said she spent her last year at Wag talking to other managers about shared staffing and training concerns. But, she said, when she talked to then-COO Griggs, he told her that making the proposed changes was too costly for the business.

Days after their conversation, Kates said, she was terminated. She said she was told by another administrator that they were discontinuing her position.

“But it was because I made those arguments. And I was adamant about it,” Kates said.

She said she warned Wag management that the lack of appropriate measures could be costly: “I would say: ‘You can’t keep this up. Something’s going to happen. A person’s going to get hurt or worse, or a dog is going to get hurt or worse.’ ”

Aubrey Sanders, who was the head of training at Wag in Oakland at the time of the 2019 pit bull attack, said she was haunted by it.

“I couldn’t sleep for weeks. This was preventable and I did everything I could to prevent it and was shut down every time,” Sanders said in an interview.

Six months before the mauling, Sanders said, she had proposed a new comprehensive training program to Griggs that included ways to prevent and de-

escalate fights between dogs. She said she received a response similar to what Kates had experienced previously.

“Corporate saw the training as a waste of time and money,” Sanders said. “But if you end up spending an insane amount of money on lawsuits and vet bills, are you actually saving money?”

Sanders was laid off on March 18, 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. She said she was one of the only employees to be permanently laid off rather than furloughed, and saw the decision as retaliation for the concerns she had raised.

Kalay did not respond to the Chronicle’s questions about the specific allegations made by Soetje, Kates or Sanders, but said that Wag had considered shutting down operations at the onset of the pandemic, “but elected to remain open chiefly to serve the doctors, nurses, EMTs, other health care professionals and first responders who were working exceedingly long hours and had an urgent need for pet care.

“Despite the added challenges the situation presented, we do not regret that decision,” Kalay said in her statement.

She said that Wag created new positions in response to some lapses that she attributed to the pandemic.

“To address the situation and ensure our care and service would return to pre-COVID levels as soon as possible, we added three senior-level positions around care, safety and training in 2022,” Kalay said.

Marilyn Schmalfeldt, the former employee in Oakland, said she pursued a worker’s compensation claim after she was injured three times at the facility, but the claim was denied. In interviews with the Chronicle, Schmalfeldt said she was bitten by a

dog and sustained a back injury from lifting large dogs. She was directed to perform labor that conflicted with her medical limitations while healing, leading to a second back injury, she said.

Schmalfeldt also said she was denied mandated breaks and would have to work off the clock because the facility was understaffed.

“Sorry, there’s not enough people right now. You’re just going to have to wait. Can you wait until your lunch?” Schmalfeldt said, recounting responses she said she got from her manager when asking to take a bathroom break.

According to the California Labor Code, employees who work more than five hours in a day are entitled to a 30-minute unpaid meal break and a 10-minute paid rest break for every four hours worked. If an employer does not allow an employee to take their meal or rest break, the employer must pay the employee for an additional hour of work per break.

Schmalfeldt agreed to a settlement pertaining to her workers’ compensation claim with Wag Hotels for \$30,000 last year, documents provided to the Chronicle show. The company denied wrongdoing, she said.

Pay stubs reviewed by the Chronicle show Wag Hotels had to pay meal penalties, equivalent to an hour of work, to employees who missed breaks. Kalay did not respond to questions about Schmalfeldt’s allegations or the settlement.

Hilary Fitzpatrick, a former shift supervisor at Wag Hotels, said the facility was understaffed and employees were denied breaks during her six-month employment at Wag’s Oakland business in 2021.
Juliana Yamada/The Chronicle

worked at from July 2017 through February 2021.

A subsequent email sent to employees from a human resources specialist at Wag Hotels said, “There is currently a lawsuit pending against Wag Hotels where an employee has alleged violations of the Labor Code related to off-the-clock work, and meal and rest periods, among other things.” Employees were asked to complete a phone interview with a company attorney regarding the matter.

“I laid it out for the lawyer very vividly,” Fitzpatrick said. “I was told by my general manager that the graveyard shift didn’t get a break. They (the general manager) thought that we just weren’t clocking out for our breaks, but we weren’t ever taking them.”

A \$730,000 settlement was reached last year. Of this sum, \$113,000 was to be divided among approximately 1,100 employees who worked at Wag between July 2020 and July 2022.

Some current and former employees at Wag Hotels said they received checks in December from the settlement.

Kalay did not respond to the Chronicle's questions about Duffell's allegations, Fitzpatrick's comments or this second settlement.

A decision: 'amputate or put her down'

Wag Hotels continues to see thousands of pets each month. Some former clients say they feel compelled to warn others not to take their animals to Wag.

In September 2021, Alison Wisdom and her family were on the last day of a nine-day vacation when they got a phone call from Wag Hotels in Redwood City. They were told that their dog, Paige, had an inflamed paw. Wag staff members were taking Paige to a veterinarian.

When they picked the dog up the following evening, the Wisdoms realized Paige needed emergency care that night and the following day. A veterinarian told Jeff Wisdom and his wife, Alison, that the labrador had acquired necrotizing fasciitis, a flesh-eating disease that spreads rapidly through the body.

"We were faced with a decision to either amputate or put her down," said Alison Wisdom.

Paige, a Labrador retriever, was treated for a flesh-eating disease in 2021 after a weeklong stay at Wag Hotels in Redwood City. Paige's leg was amputated; her owners, Alison and Jeff Wisdom, spent more than \$30,000 on her medical care. Kyle Grillot/Special to The Chronicle

vet visits, the wisdoms spent more than \$30,000 on her care, medical records show.

Because of the length of Paige's stay at Wag, the Wisdoms said, they believe that their dog must have acquired the disease during her stay there. Five contagious bacteria strains were found on Paige by the veterinarian — who had to wear gloves to treat the dog — after her stay at Wag Hotels.

"I suspect some type of puncture wound that developed abscess and cellulitis, probably didn't get noticed right away at boarding, can't rule out some type of bug/snake bite but think less likely," the doctor wrote in Paige's medical records on Sept. 21, one day after she left Wag and three days before the amputation.

The Wisdoms said they desperately tried to speak with Wag representatives about the incident and what was being done to ensure other dogs' safety.

"Just getting to the point where we could talk to anybody, either communicate over email or communicate over phone, was such a ridiculous, slapstick routine of incompetence. It was stunning," said Alison Wisdom.

In an email to Kristin Rau, Wag's director of customer success, Alison Wisdom asked 15 questions about Paige's stay, including if Wag had records showing that staff completed cleaning protocols during Paige's stay and whether staff had logged Paige's health issues in any way.

Rau responded to 11 of these questions by writing that the information was confidential to Wag Hotels, according to emails provided to the Chronicle.

“Any logs or records of such incidents and health related issues at the WAG Hotel at which Paige boarded and/or similar such health-related issues at other WAG Hotels during her stay are confidential and proprietary to WAG,” Rau wrote.

To Alison Wisdom’s question about staffing levels, Rau again responded that the information was confidential, but told Wisdom that Wag had a “sufficient number of handlers” during Paige’s stay.

No changes were made to cleaning protocols after the incident, Rau said, because Paige’s condition was not diagnosed in other dogs staying with Wag at that time. Wag Hotels did not offer to pay Paige’s medical bills.

In her statement, Kalay did not respond to the Chronicle’s questions about Paige’s case.

“We realize you’ve spoken to some former employees and a handful of less-than-satisfied clients as well as the client contacts we shared with you several months ago,” Kalay said. “While you may want the facts to fit into a particular thesis, when you look at the big picture, Wag Hotels is an 18-year-old pet care company that consistently receives positive ratings from the vast majority of clients in an industry that, by its very nature, has more than a normal share of daily challenges.”

The Wisdoms wanted to sue Wag Hotels but decided not to, they said, afraid they could not handle a long legal battle after the emotional toll the experience had already taken on them. The couple said they were upset by the experience, and the “cold” response they received from Wag, saying they were drawn in by marketing that portrayed the boarding facility as “super loving towards animals.”

“If you want to make a safe environment,” Jeff Wisdom said, “you get information out there, because everybody wins if things are safer.”

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