

US & WORLD // CALIFORNIA

Filthy pets. An amputated leg. Inside alleged ‘absolute neglect’ at Wag Hotels

The popular California-based day care and boarding facility chain promises a luxury experience for pets. But some say it delivers far less.



Provided by Alison Wisdom



MELISSA NEWCOMB

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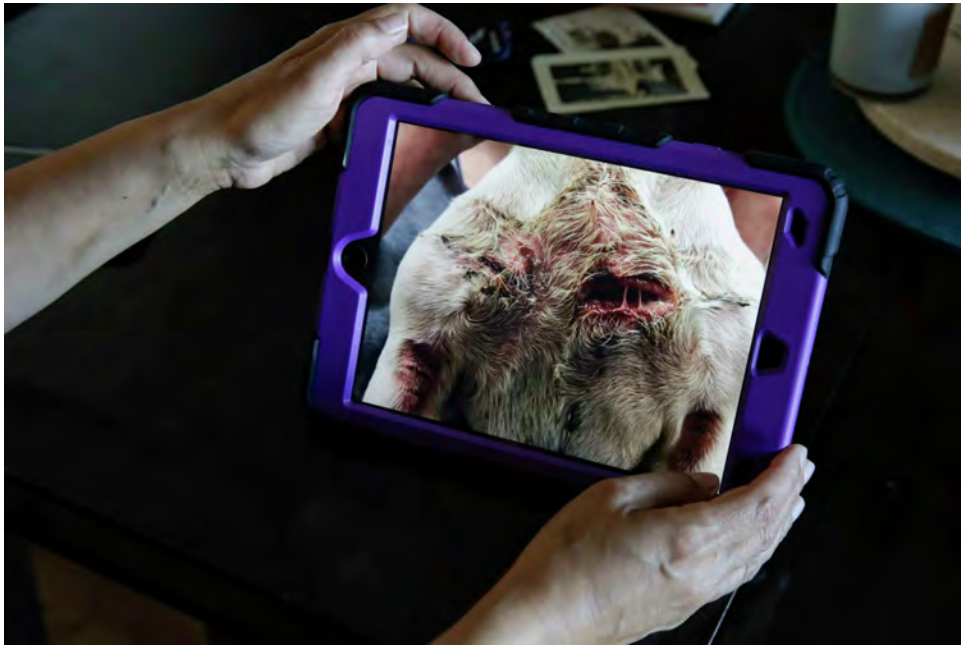
Last summer, Susan Sanchez dropped off her French bulldog at a boarding facility in San Francisco’s Mission District before catching a flight to visit family. Sanchez, a nurse from San Bruno, was confident Shadow would be in good hands: Wag Hotels, a popular luxury pet hotel chain where “suites” cost up to \$160 a night, brands itself as the “ultimate stay and play resort with luxury accommodations.”

But a week later, when Sanchez returned, she held her dog in disbelief. Shadow, she said, was covered in fleas. Her paws were dark red and swollen, she appeared to have lost weight, and yellow pus dripped down her legs. Worst of all, Sanchez recalled, Shadow smelled like rotting flesh.

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Peeling off the back brace that Shadow wears during play to treat an intervertebral disc disease common in Frenchies, Sanchez discovered deep, black wounds where the brace had sliced the dog’s skin.

The smell was rotting flesh, Sanchez realized in horror. “I said to them, ‘What kind of inhumane, cruel treatment is this? How do you let an animal stay in this kind of filth?’ ”



Above: Susan Sanchez shows photos on her iPad of the wounds that she said her dog, Shadow, sustained while staying at Wag Hotels in San Francisco last summer. Sanchez said that Shadow, a French bulldog, had severe lacerations on her back because Wag did not remove the dog's brace during the weeklong stay as instructed. Top: Jeff and Alison Wisdom's dog, Paige, lies on the back patio of their Redwood City home after a September 2022 surgery to amputate her leg. Salgu Wissmath/The Chronicle

Last summer, allegations that Wag Hotels mistreated dogs burst into the public sphere when two popular TikTokkers uploaded separate videos accusing the San Francisco location of neglecting their dogs, both goldendoodles. One of those influencers, Michelle Nguyen, told followers that her dog, Miso, came back from Wag covered in urine, and that the link to a live video feed she paid for to monitor Miso's August 2022 stay was not provided.

Mike Griggs, then the chief operating officer of Wag, [told SFGATE at the time](#) that “there were a few issues” with Miso's stay, but denied that animals were subject to maltreatment at the day care and boarding business. “Wag Hotels is committed to delivering top-of-the-line care and service to all guests,” Griggs told the news site, which is owned by the same parent company as The Chronicle.

Founded in 2005 in West Sacramento, Wag Hotels serves dogs and cats at nine California locations, catering to a clientele that includes wealthy pet owners from Silicon Valley to Hollywood. “You can enjoy the freedom of peace of mind at Wag Hotels,” the company's website states. “In addition to taking care of your pet, we provide you with 4-star hotel service.”

Wag says its “science-based approach is incorporated into our methodologies to ensure a safe, comfortable and low-stress experience for our guests” and promises “professionally trained staff on site 24 hours a day.”

But more than a dozen Wag clients told the Chronicle that in their experience, Wag Hotels has neglected dogs and put them in danger, failing to feed them on time or at all, and failing to administer important medications. Emails, text messages and pet medical records paint a picture of an operation that promises luxury but has delivered far less, leaving some pets with serious injuries.

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The Chronicle also spoke with 29 current and former employees of Wag, many of whom said they were hired despite having no experience in animal care, then provided with insufficient training or no training at all. Additionally, these workers said, the facilities are often dirty and understaffed. Legally mandated break periods aren’t always provided, allegations that are reflected in lawsuits and settlement documents reviewed by the Chronicle.

Many of these current and former employees backed up clients’ claims that pets at Wag were not properly fed or medicated, or were returned reeking of urine and feces. They believe Wag’s labor practices have contributed to the alleged issues that, in some cases, left dogs with serious injuries requiring emergency medical treatment.

Carter Shults sits with Brutus, his French bulldog, who he says came home with his paw pads scraped off after visits in 2020 and 2021 to a Wag Hotels location in Hollywood.

Kyle Grillot/Special to The Chronicle

an interview, and she declined the Chronicle’s multiple requests for an interview with CEO David Appel. Neither Appel nor former COO Griggs, who no longer works at Wag, agreed to be interviewed when a reporter contacted them directly.

Nevertheless, the Chronicle sent Wag leaders a detailed memo outlining the allegations contained in this article. In response, Kalay sent an emailed statement in which she did not deny the allegations, answer the newspaper’s questions or address specific cases, including Shadow’s.

In the statement, Kalay acknowledged lapses in pet care at Wag that she attributed to navigating the coronavirus pandemic. She said these issues made up a small fraction of clients’ experiences at Wag, citing an internal survey showing that the vast majority of pet parents were happy with the care their animals received during recent stays. The company has committed to making improvements, Kalay said, creating additional senior staff positions to focus on safety and training.

“From our inception, we have been on a mission to provide the highest level of care and service in a clean, safe and hygienic facility designed specifically for dogs and cats,” Kalay said. “We care deeply about pet care standards, and have championed California regulations to raise standards relating to the care and boarding of pets.

“That said,” Kalay continued, “we want to be transparent in acknowledging that, during COVID, there were cases where the care we provided fell short.”

Last year, a former employee sued Wag in a putative class action, alleging labor violations including failure to pay minimum wages and overtime, and failure to give staff proper meal or rest breaks. The company settled for \$730,000 while denying wrongdoing, Sacramento County Superior Court records show.

Several current and former employees, including some who held senior leadership positions, told the Chronicle that they were so overworked that they frequently gave pets their meals or medications late or missed them altogether.

“We were told by our general manager to lie to the owners’ faces,” said Hilary Fitzpatrick, a former shift supervisor at Wag’s business in Oakland. “This was especially common for if an animal got hurt, so we wouldn’t be liable.”

Signs found in public areas throughout Wag facilities state that the staff is trained in pet CPR. No current or former employees interviewed said they had received pet CPR training from Wag.

Kalay did not answer specific questions from the Chronicle about these allegations in her statement to the newspaper, but said the rebounding of travel two years into the pandemic compromised Wag’s ability to hire and train employees.

“In late 2021, to accommodate the growing needs of our guests as work and travel began to return to near-normal patterns, we hired and trained a variety of new

associates. As with other service companies, we experienced bumps in the road along that journey,” Kalay said.

In October 2022, the Wag spokesperson connected the Chronicle with two clients who she said had positive experiences. Both said they were happy with their pets’ care at Wag.

James Hyland said he has taken his four dogs to Wag’s location in Hollywood dozens of times for overnight stays. He described the check-in process as he rushes to and from the airport as “seamless.”

“They have a computer system that has all your information on file in terms of when my dogs eat, any medication, you know, everything,” said Hyland, who lives in Sherman Oaks (Los Angeles County).

Julie Jeremy said she takes her golden retriever, Bandit, to the San Francisco facility, where she said employees engaged with Bandit and other dogs during an easy drop-off process.

Jeremy said she was unconcerned about allegations that pets have come home from Wag covered in waste. “Bandit will go to a dog park and roll in some crap and (I’ll) say, ‘Oh, man, Bandit, now I have to wash you,’ ” she said. “Then, you know, you go to Wag and the dog is playing and it rolls into another dog’s throwup. That happens right? It’s a dog thing.”

Susan Sanchez holds Shadow, her French bulldog, at her home in San Bruno. Sanchez said Shadow had deep lacerations on her back after Wag Hotels staff failed to remove her brace during a stay at the San Francisco facility in 2022. Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Carlos Funes, a former employee at Wag San Francisco, was on shift when Sanchez first saw Shadow's injuries. He grabbed a towel to help cover the open wounds.

"We were trying to calm (Sanchez) down. She was pretty frantic. I don't blame her at all for reacting the way she did. That's her dog," said Funes, who said he was also shocked by the severity of the injuries.

At Sanchez's request, Wag paid more than \$3,000 to cover medical care required for Shadow, including overnight emergency veterinary care, according to medical records, emails and text messages.

But Sanchez said the money does not make up for her dog's treatment at Wag, which she described as "absolute neglect and negligence."

"Assume the worst," she said, "and don't bring your pet here if you care for your dog at all."

'The most grotesque thing I've ever seen'

Since launching nearly two decades ago, Wag has opened four locations in the Bay Area — San Francisco, Oakland, Santa Clara and Redwood City — and four in

Southern California. The facilities are marketed like hotels, with clients purchasing kennel options referred to as "rooms and suites" and paying for upgrades such as treats and grooming services.

Wag was founded by "pet lovers who couldn't find a suitable place to leave their pets during business trips," the company's website reads. "What started as a personal quest has grown into the ultimate boarding and daycare resort for dogs and cats. We provide the highest level of service ... to delight pets and their parents."

Pet owners can pay for a dog boarding "suite" option that costs \$128 to \$160 if they want access to a 24-hour camera feed to watch their pets in their kennels or rooms. Additionally, there are cameras in group day care rooms, called "All Day Play," where dogs are separated by size. These feeds are available for free on Wag's website.

Clients who spoke to the Chronicle said they were inclined to trust Wag with their pets because of its luxury-experience branding and the cameras, which seemed to promise transparency.

Instead, many of them said, their dogs came home filthy, injured or traumatized.

The Chronicle began speaking with employees and clients of Wag after Nguyen posted her video on Aug. 8, 2022, saying she had picked up Miso in a "horrificing state." Nguyen said Miso was panting and frantically pacing. The goldendoodle's legs and stomach were covered in urine in photos she shared with the newspaper.

Nguyen had purchased a suite for Miso at the San Francisco facility that was supposed to come with a 24/7 video feed. In her TikTok, Nguyen said she did not receive an access link for the feed until two days after she had dropped off Miso, though she requested it several times over the phone. When she asked Wag staff