

about Miso's condition when she picked him up, Nguyen said she was told he had been "having too much fun in all-day play."

"I never use my social media like this, but if you're a dog or cat owner in California who's thinking about using Wag Hotels, stay far, far, far away," said Nguyen in her video. In a separate video, she said a lawyer representing Wag Hotels had called her to offer a complimentary grooming.

"When I told him Miso would never be stepping into a Wag Hotels ever again, a cease-and-desist letter was mentioned," she said, though she did not receive one.

dirty, smelling like urine. "The playgroups are so oversubscribed, they're so crowded, that it's almost like, you know, those fishes that are in fish tanks where they can barely swim by each other," Chan said. "The dogs barely have space to move around. It's honestly unethical."

But "the worst part of the whole experience," Chan said, is that "they do not feed your dog." She had access to the video feed she paid for, she said, and watched Cobie cry for hours for food.

Cobie stayed for two nights and was fed around 9:15 p.m. on the first night, over two hours past the feeding time that Chan had requested. Chan said she called four times, getting no answer, and sent an email to the center expressing her frustration and requesting her pet be fed around 7 p.m. the next day.

On the second night, Wag staff fed him at 10:55 p.m., Chan's screenshots of the live video show — and only after Chan directed more angry voicemails and emails to the center.

"Cobie is a sweet and quiet dog," Chan said in an interview. "Watching him bark and howl on a web camera feed for hours, knowing that he wasn't fed and not being able to get through to anyone on the Wag Hotels team was the most distressing experience."

A Wag representative told Chan that the company cannot promise specific feeding times for dogs, but aims for between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. Wag told Chan that Cobie was given a "complimentary" bath and was not abused or neglected during her boarding.

In her statement, Kalay, the Wag spokesperson, did not respond to the Chronicle's specific questions about these cases. "Nothing operates perfectly 100% of the time in any business, so while it is true that we've had the occasional camera drop WiFi

Images of dogs decorate the exterior of the Wag Hotels location in Oakland.
Juliana Yamada/The Chronicle

In a second viral video, TikTok user Priscilla Chan said that her goldendoodle, Cobie, was not fed regularly at the same Mission District facility and was returned

signal or we've missed a guest cleanup following fun-filled play group activities, our focus on safety, health, and care remains second to none," Kalay said.

Several other former clients said they were frustrated and alarmed after discovering that their pets might not have been fed. In May, Mary Ignacio dropped off her Siberian husky at about 11 a.m. for day care at Wag's location in Oakland. According to Ignacio, she gave the staff a blue bag that contained three bags of portioned food. When she returned with her husband around midnight to pick her dog up, the blue bag was not returned.

"They look to find it and can't. They tell us that it's lost," Ignacio recalled. Finally, she said, the bag was found — with all three food bags untouched.

Ignacio asked for proof that her husky had been fed. "They admitted that whoever worked before them failed to fill the chart out and they had no proof that my dog had been taken care of," she said.

A bank statement that Ignacio shared with the Chronicle shows she was refunded \$103 for her dog's stay at Wag. But, she said, "No amount of money will make up for neglecting an animal."

Kalay did not respond to the Chronicle's questions about Ignacio's allegations, but said that former clients who spoke to the newspaper represent "an exceedingly small percentage of the thousands of pet families we serve every year."

"Our clients trust us with their pets and we do everything we can to maintain that trust by continually enhancing our employee training and our care methodologies as well as by adding new services to the mix," Kalay said.

She cited an internal 2023 Wag survey in which, the company said, 93% of 3,097 respondents stated that "our guest visits either met or exceeded client expectations

for care and service." Kalay did not share additional details about the survey or its methodology with the Chronicle.

In some cases, animals left Wag with serious injuries that required emergency medical treatment.

Carter Shults, who works in the entertainment industry and lives in West Hollywood, brought his French bulldog, Brutus, to Wag Hotels in Hollywood on Oct. 23, 2020, for what was described as an All Day Play session while he worked. When Shults picked his dog up later that day, he said, Brutus could barely walk.

Documents reviewed by the Chronicle show that Wag issued Shults a refund for the March 2021 stay. He has not brought Brutus back to Wag since.

“It was absolutely psychotic,” Shults said. “And I never got an answer about it.”

Understaffed and overwhelmed

While clients said they were surprised by the mistreatment their pets appeared to experience at Wag, current and former employees said such neglect was foreseeable. Although they wanted to provide good care to the animals, these employees said, they were understaffed, undertrained and overwhelmed.

Josue Rodriguez, who was a bather at Wag in San Francisco during the time Chan, Ngyuen and Sanchez brought in their dogs, said he was familiar with all three cases.

“All three of those situations were very preventable,” Rodriguez said. “The owners were absolutely justified for being upset. It’s appalling. They are animals and people trust us with them.”

Rodriguez said that during every shift, at least two or three animals would be dirty and covered in excrement from All Day Play or from being in their kennels. Managers would ask him to bathe dogs before returning them to their owners, who would be told their pets had received a “complimentary bath.”

Rodriguez said he quit in September when a regional manager added three filth-covered dogs to his schedule, despite knowing he needed to leave for a web coding class.

“She ended up saying, ‘Well, there’s three dogs and they’re small dogs. You can get them done. They’re dirty from All Day Play. We don’t want another Miso incident,’ ”

Carter Shults says his dog, Brutus, experienced damaged pads during day care at Wag. Top: a detail of Brutus' pad. Above: Brutus lays with his feet wrapped on Nov. 1, 2020, after leaving day care at Wag with cuts on his feet days earlier. Photos provided by Carter Shults

March 2021, he decided to give Wag Hotels another try. But at pickup, he said, he was horrified to once again see Brutus’ paw pads severely injured.

Kalay did not respond to questions about Brutus’ alleged injuries at Wag.

said Rodriquez, recounting the exchange and the reference to Nguyen's goldendoodle. "It really set me off because is she blaming me for why Miso was so dirty? I had enough. I grabbed my stuff and walked out of the door."

Rodriquez and other employees said a lack of oversight of All Day Play can lead to dangerous and unsanitary conditions. While more than 50 dogs can be enclosed in one indoor playroom, just one staff member is responsible for preventing behavioral issues and fights and for keeping the room clean, they said.

Photos and videos reviewed by the Chronicle show dogs repeatedly defecating bloody stool and pacing in circles. A former senior manager at multiple Wag locations said it was typical for puddles of urine and piles of feces to build up on the playroom floor, and for some dogs to lie in it.

"I've had to mop the whole floor because it'll be covered in pee and poop," said Ashton Brewer, a former shift lead at the San Francisco location. "Dogs will be basically laying in pee all the time."

Video taken inside Wag facilities.
Video: Video provided by former Wag employees, combined by the Chronicle

Brewer and other employees also said they frequently saw rodents in the facility in San Francisco. At the Oakland location, gnats would swarm the pipes urine drained into, said Marilyn Schmalfeldt, a former employee.

Individual kennels, which Wag refers to as "rooms and suites," have suffered from dirty conditions as well, according to current and former employees. They reported that excrement would not be cleaned for hours, leading to animals sometimes lying in it or consuming it. Photos provided to the Chronicle showed kennels with uncleaned urine, feces and blood.

"I remember spending maybe three hours cleaning one of those rooms, because people just neglect the rooms pretty badly," said Brewer.

One photo from the Redwood City location showed a bowl of cat food that had grown mold.

Kalay did not respond to the Chronicle's specific questions regarding these allegations about conditions at its facilities. "We believe in continuous improvement and are laser-focused on delivering the industry's best care and service across our 15 locations," she said in her statement.

Wag's website says, "Our staff hails from the best animal science programs in the country. We have worked in notable institutions like the San Diego Zoo and in prominent veterinary offices throughout California."

But multiple employees who spoke to the Chronicle said they had never worked with animals before joining Wag. All but one said they had received inadequate training before being assigned to manage a room or carry out other tasks.

Fights between dogs occur frequently, current and former employees said. Clients self-report if their animals have had any previous temperament issues.

"I dreaded going to work," said Marina Fernandez, a former employee at the Redwood City facility. "It was just disgusting, it's filthy, it's heartbreaking. It's a terrible facility."

During a shift in October 2021, Fernandez said, she was feeding dogs and administering medication — tasks that made her uncomfortable, she said, because she had not received training to do so — when a manager asked her to help bring dogs to a play group.

“So there are these two bulldogs and one of them was aggressive and the other one was fine. I accidentally grabbed the wrong dog because I was rushing to finish feedings and also to help the other employees,” Fernandez recalled. “I took the wrong dog out and it unfortunately attacked another dog and broke the other dog’s neck. I fully took responsibility for it because I felt so bad.”

Tatyana Knowles told the Chronicle she was working the same shift, and ran to the playroom after an employee called for help over a walkie-talkie.

“They were holding the dog that was attacked,” Knowles recalled. “It was a white poodle mix so she was all white and fluffy, but she was almost completely red. She was very badly injured. There was blood everywhere. And the other dog had blood all over its mouth.”

Knowles said the dogs, who usually wear color-coordinated collars to label if they are reactive, did not have collars on.

Fernandez was fired after the incident, both Knowles and Fernandez recalled.

“Marina, she was really upset about it. She was crying,” said Knowles, who was there when Fernandez was told of her termination and escorted off the property.

Knowles was 19 when Wag Hotels in Redwood City hired her in June 2021. It was her first job, she said.

She said that during her second week of work, without completing training, she was scheduled to work the night shift alone. When she expressed concern to her managers, she said, they told her to call them if she needed anything.

“I was like, ‘You’re going to leave me in a place alone with nobody and over 200 dogs?’ ” Knowles said. “I was extremely stressed. I didn’t get to all the meals I was

supposed to.”

During the shift, she noticed that a dog was bleeding so badly that blood was dripping out of the kennel. She called two managers, she said, but neither picked up the phone. Knowles took a video of the dog’s condition, which she shared with the Chronicle.

Kalay did not address questions about any of these specific cases or employee allegations in her statement to The Chronicle, but attributed general issues to pandemic-related stressors.

“New and variable return-to-work policies by employers, higher-than-normal separation anxiety in both pet parents and pets themselves, and accelerating travel post-COVID strained our ability to provide quality care 100% of the time,” she said.

Before then, though, current and former Wag employees said it was common for them to feel like management had set them up to fail, sometimes with dire consequences.