

San Francisco Chronicle

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Tensions reignite at zoo over safety

Incidents in recent years have led workers to quit, say they've lost faith in management

By Tara Duggan

One Saturday morning last May, a keeper at the San Francisco Zoo heard footsteps behind him in the grizzly bear grotto. Believing it was a co-worker, he turned, only to see the hulking brown form of Kiona. He thought he'd safely locked her in her den, but the door, which is operated from an adjoining room, had an unusual feature: Its lock could be fasten-

ed even without the door being securely closed.

The zookeeper began to run, and with Kiona in pursuit, he circled the grotto, according to people familiar with his account. He then sprinted through the door into the keeper area, according to surveillance video. When Kiona stopped briefly, the keeper escaped through a gate and closed it behind him.

At that point, the almost 500-
Zoo continues on A11

"I knew nothing was going to change as far as my welfare concerns I had for the animals I was responsible for. I knew it was going to continue getting worse."

Melissa Lory, keeper at San Francisco Zoo from 2019 to 2021

Ex-ambassador calls China's loan of pandas a 'deescalation signal,' but will it boost Breed?

By Shira Stein and Ko Lyn Cheang

Mayor London Breed's agenda during her trip to China was black and white: bringing pandas to the San Francisco Zoo.

Her success in securing a promise to send the animals will write a new chapter in a long history of panda diplomacy in the United States.

Several of the giant pandas at U.S. zoos had been called home

to China — which retains ownership of the animals and their offspring — in recent years, generating fears that their presence in America was coming to an end.

Chinese President Xi Jinping indicated that pandas could be coming to California in a speech in San Francisco in November, and earlier this year the country announced that it would send two pandas to the
Pandas continues on A10

Small town, big issue



Photos by Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

A community service officer clears a tent from Riverside Park in Grants Pass, Ore., after the tent's owner was arrested. The small city is at the center of a pivotal case on homelessness policies that is about to be taken up by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Oregon homelessness case before top court could reshape policy nationwide

GRANTS PASS, Ore. — It was moving day, again, for Brenda Daigneault.

Police officers in this small city about an hour's drive north of the California border visited her tent in a local park. They came to order her to leave, she said, posting the same notice that every homeless person living in one of Grants Pass' public spaces gets every 72 hours.

If she didn't move in three days, she would get a \$295 ticket — and perhaps see her belongings confiscated. Again.

But Daigneault couldn't get a ride from her son, who is homeless too and whose truck wasn't working. So, despite her chronic respiratory problems, she walked a mile from Tussing Park to the next closest park.

Daigneault, 62, is part of an endless choreography that law enforcement officers and the unhoused perform in Grants Pass — one that could soon reverberate far beyond Oregon.

By Joe Garofoli



Brenda Daigneault lies in her tent in Tussing Park in Grants Pass. "It's waking up every day and seeing where I'm at," Daigneault said. "I'm just tired."

INSIDE

Cities are desperate for rules on policing homelessness. Will the high court answer these three big questions? **A15**

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear a case brought by unhoused residents here who say the city's broad anti-camping rules violate the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Legal scholars and advocates on both sides of the case say the court's decision could reshape homeless policy across the nation.

The saga began to take shape in 2018, when the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that local governments could not make it a crime to sleep on a public street or sidewalk when, simultaneously, no homeless shelters were available. The court in 2022 went a step further and said Grants Pass could not prohibit simple self-protective measures for the homeless, like using blankets, or punish them by imposing civil fines that turn into criminal penalties when unpaid.

Homeless continues on A16

Reported S.F. crimes plunging, data shows

Decrease continuing after pandemic surge

By Megan Cassidy

Reported crimes fell in San Francisco over the first quarter of 2024 across all categories, with some offenses dipping to levels last seen before the pandemic — welcome news in a city that has seen its image battered over concerns about public safety.

The trends, documented in city police data, continue the downward trajectory San Francisco saw in 2023, when cities nationwide experienced falling crime.

The figures include double-digit percentage drops in both violent and property crimes, with homicides falling from 11 to 8, rapes by 23%, and burglaries by 15% over the same time last year. Larceny — a type of theft that includes San Francisco's notoriously high level of car burglaries — fell the most over the previous year, plunging by 35% from 8,389 reported incidents to 5,402, the city's statistics showed.

From January through March, San Francisco saw decreases in every major crime category tracked by the FBI for its Uniform Crime Reporting Program, which includes homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, arson, larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft.

As with all crime fluctuations, criminologists caution against assigning too much credit or blame to any single policy or police action.

But San Francisco leaders said a coordinated crackdown by local, state and federal law enforcement has chipped away at some of the city's most persistent public safety problems, including its infamously high rate of property crimes.

Jeff Cretan, a spokesperson for Mayor London Breed, said that for many years public safety agencies in San Francisco were relatively siloed. The local U.S. Attorney's Office and Drug Enforcement Administration didn't reliably communicate with local law enforcement, and the two previous district attorneys, George Gascón and Chesa Boudin, were often philosophically at
Crimes continues on A8

DatebookG1 | Insight.....F1 | Obituaries.....C1 | WEATHER: Mostly sunny. Highs: 62-85. Lows: 46-57. B6 | 7 38805 30001 7

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Thursday, May 16th; 10 am - 5 pm
Friday, May 17th; 9 am - end of auction
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PANDAS

From page A1

San Diego Zoo. Breed, however, wasn't deterred and announced that part of the intention of her trip to China this week was for continued panda lobbying — a move that paid off.

Relations between China and the U.S. have been strained for years, with divisions over human rights, tariffs and trade policy, Taiwan, the invasion of Ukraine and pandemic travel restrictions among the many flash points.

Tensions have dissipated since the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November, when President Joe Biden and Xi agreed to increase cooperation on fentanyl manufacturing and exportation, resume military-to-military communications and work together on artificial intelligence regulation.

Barbara Bodine, a former U.S. ambassador and director of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, said China's interest in bringing pandas to more U.S. zoos is a sign the two nations are reestablishing channels of communication. "It's a deescalation signal," Bodine said, otherwise known as "cuddle diplomacy."

But the news also comes as the San Francisco Zoo faces turmoil behind the scenes. A Chronicle investigation recently revealed employees' concerns about animal welfare and worker safety — especially in light of an incident last year when a zookeeper was chased by a grizzly bear after its den door was accidentally left open.

Pandas can be huge economic drivers for cities that host them. Before a panda pair at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., was returned to China in 2023, the Washington Post reported that more than 250,000 people visited during their last six weeks there — a 179% boost compared with the year before.

San Francisco's zoo briefly hosted two pandas in 1984, boosting its attendance by four times the usual amount, the Chronicle reported at the time.



Liu Zheng/Associated Press

San Francisco Mayor London Breed and Wu Minglu, secretary-general of the China Wildlife Conservation Association, attend a signing ceremony Friday in Beijing for an agreement to lease giant pandas for the San Francisco Zoological Society and Gardens.

The zoo will have to pay an annual fee to China to have the animals on loan, a cost that has generally been \$1 million per year, which China says goes to panda conservation research.

Zoos typically see an initial boost in visitor numbers from pandas but don't see many long-term financial benefits, Nikkei Asia reported.

Xi "indicated a willingness to think about returning" some of the pandas at a dinner during APEC, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Nov. 16. "We obviously appreciated having them here, and we respect the sovereign decision that China made to remove some of those pandas."

China has used pandas as a tool for their diplomatic efforts for decades. They have often been used as an inducement tool for negotiations between China and other countries, Bo-

dine wrote.

The panda diplomacy, however, won't prevent U.S. lawmakers from working to address issues they see in China.

Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi said the pandas will be a "wonderful addition" to San Francisco, but she is focused on human rights in China, spokesperson Aaron Bennett told the Chronicle.

"In keeping with her practice of urging leaders traveling officially to China to raise human rights issues, Speaker Emerita Pelosi communicated these concerns to Mayor Breed in the hopes that she would convey them in her public and private engagements in China," Bennett said.

Many Asian American community leaders in San Francisco have supported the Breed administration's campaign to bring giant pandas from China to the city zoo. A Feb. 29 letter

from Breed to Xi stating that the city was ready to welcome giant pandas to the zoo was co-signed by about 70 Asian American community leaders and organizations.

Some Chinese American political advocates say Breed's panda diplomacy overtures could boost her reelection campaign. It's not just about the pandas, they say; it's about what the pandas represent: boosting the city's economy through friendlier ties with China as well as respect for Chinese culture.

"This effort is overwhelmingly supported by the Chinese community," said Josephine Zhao, president of the Chinese American Democratic Club and among the signers of the February letter. "Panda diplomacy is one great addition to the mayor's reelection. In addition, if the results from this trip can bring instantaneous re-

sults from the commercial relations between San Francisco and China, that would also benefit the economy of the city that most voters would care about."

Bill Lee, a former city administrator who closely watches Asian American city politics, said before the announcement that if Breed manages to secure a giant panda for the San Francisco Zoo, it would give her an advantage among Chinese voters as it would demonstrate her understanding of and sensitivity to the importance of pandas as a symbol in Chinese culture. Lee called pandas a "Chinese living treasure."

Julie Johnson and Tara Duggan contributed to this report.

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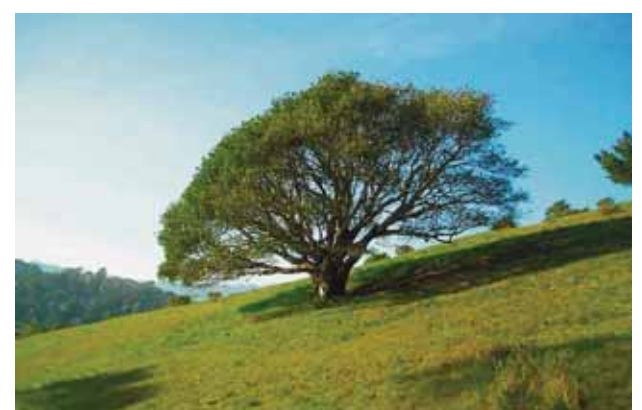
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ZOO

From page A1

pound grizzly ambled into the keeper area and was separated from the public by a gate, a regular door and a chain-link barrier, said Travis Shields, then the assistant curator of the zoo's carnivores department, which includes the bears. Shields was away at the time but was briefed by workers who were involved or listening on the radio.

Zoo employees who came to the keeper's aid found him in a panic and the grizzly roaming the keeper area, Shields said. The zookeepers managed to coax Kiona into her other outdoor habitat and locked the doors.

No one was hurt during the close call, which has not been previously reported. But an investigation by the Chronicle shows that it was one of several incidents in recent years in which employee safety or animal welfare at the San Francisco Zoo was compromised, a situation that has led many workers to resign or say they have lost faith in the management of the 95-year-old institution.

There's a long history of tension between the zoo's top brass and its front-line workers. The 100-acre, city-owned facility in the southwest corner of San Francisco has worked to rebound from high-profile troubles that rattled employees and shocked the public, including the Christmas Day 2007 killing of a guest by an escaped tiger and the crushing death of a baby gorilla in 2014.

But the continuing problems, including the previously unreported death last year of a young penguin struck by a "guillotine" door, have sapped morale and prompted high turnover among the staff trained to care for more than 2,000 animals, said Corey Hallman, a representative of the zoo's 95-member labor union. The problems, in his view, could lead to further incidents.

"Eventually something more severe is going to happen in the future if they continue on the same path," said Shields, who resigned last July over what he described as upper management's disregard of keepers' concerns.



Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

The grizzly bear grotto at the San Francisco Zoo was the site of a previously unreported close call between grizzly bear Kiona and a keeper last May. No one was hurt in the incident.



Brontë Wittpenn/The Chronicle 2022

Visitors watch grizzly bear sisters Kachina and Kiona dive for fish at the zoo, which is 95 years old.

The Chronicle presented zoo leaders with details of recent incidents at the zoo that prompted concerns from workers. Edward Poole, a board member and chair emeritus of the San Francisco Zoological Society, the nonprofit membership organization that operates the zoo for the city, said by email that the questions were "predicated on outdated or simply untrue information" and were "uniformly objectionable and baseless."

Poole said that the incident in the grizzly bear grotto did not

endanger guests and that a subsequent U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection found the zoo in compliance with its license.

"One of our zookeepers entered the grizzly bear's habitat area at a time when it was believed that the bear was restricted to another part of its containment area," he said. He wrote that "due to a number of safety measures employed, the situation was quickly resolved. ... This incident underscores our steadfast commitment to ensur-

ing the welfare of both our staff and the animals in our care."

The zoo made updates to improve the lock system in the 1930s-era grizzly bear grotto in the months following the incident, zookeeper logs obtained by the Chronicle show.

It's rare for zoo animals, especially dangerous ones, to escape "primary containment" — meaning the specific enclosure areas designated for their use — said Dan Ashe, CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which provides accreditation to the San Francisco Zoo and over 250 other facilities worldwide.

The close encounter between the keeper and grizzly occurred at a time when the San Francisco Zoo was already struggling to retain skilled animal care staff. The zoo typically has around 12 curators, or managers, but since 2020, nine have resigned and one has retired, according to interviews, LinkedIn profiles and internal emails obtained by the Chronicle. Though most curator positions have been filled, the employees who left each had between 10 and 50 years of experience in animal care.

The number of zookeepers and other union staff decreased by 19% between 2019 and late 2023, Hallman, the union repre-

sentative and a former zookeeper, said, leaving remaining keepers in charge of more animal exhibits. "It's a public safety and worker safety issue," he said.

Poole said that "the zoo takes safety — and the concerns of its staff seriously," noting that management hosts a regular safety committee meeting. The ratio of keepers to animals has increased in the past five years, he said, with the number of animals in major categories like apes, birds and carnivores declining.

Three former employees said in interviews that they quit mainly due to disagreements with zoo administrators over animal welfare standards. Melissa Lory, a zookeeper from 2019 to 2021; Trisha Cassianni, a keeper from 2007 to 2021; and Dayna Sherwood, a keeper from 2006 to 2018, each cited a case or cases when, in their view, animals suffered because of decisions made by upper management about medical care or housing.

"I knew nothing was going to change as far as my welfare concerns I had for the animals I was responsible for," said Lory, who was an orangutan keeper during a six-month period when, she said, the primates lived in an enclosure without access to a yard. "I knew it was going to continue getting worse."

Cassianni, who also worked with the orangutans, described the zoo as "dysfunctional," saying, "It just didn't seem like the zoo cared enough about the animals."

In his emailed comments, Poole said the zoo has provided excellent care to its animals, many of which are endangered or rescued, despite the "unprecedented challenges" of the pandemic. He touted the zoo's conservation programs and noted that the zoo has received accreditation every five years by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and passed annual inspections by the USDA.

"Combined, these evaluations comprehensively assess our animal care, veterinary care and animal handling procedures," Poole said.

Fifteen additional current and former animal care employees shared concerns with the Chronicle about the zoo's over-

Zoo continues on A12

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ZOO

From page A11

sight of animal welfare standards and said they felt that upper management was dismissive of employee input. These workers agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity because they still work at the zoo or in the field and said they feared professional repercussions. Several said they remained shaken by what happened to their co-worker in the grizzly bear grotto. The Chronicle granted them anonymity under the newspaper's confidential source policy.

One of the 15 employees said they had brought up concerns about grizzly bear security to management years before the May 2023 event. "I just felt intensely, but ambiguously, unsafe," the person said in an email.

The zoo, which is overseen by the city's Recreation and Park Commission, is recovering from the loss of income caused by COVID lockdowns. Zoo revenue dropped from \$24.5 million during the fiscal year ending in June 2019 to \$20.5 million the following year, tax documents show. Revenue then increased to \$36 million in the 2022 fiscal year, leaving \$9.7 million after expenses, the highest surplus in a decade.

San Francisco provides \$4 million a year in taxpayer money to support the zoo. Much of its remaining funding comes from admission fees, retail sales, donations and membership dues. The city's annual contribution hasn't changed since the Zoological Society took over zoo operations in 1993, and the zoo has not received a major influx of public funds to renovate its aging structures since a \$48 million bond measure passed in 1997.

While the city owns the zoo and its animals, the Zoological Society's lease agreement with the parks department makes it "responsible for all day-to-day maintenance and management of the grounds, buildings and facilities, including the animal enclosures," Daniel Montes, a parks spokesperson, said in an email. Phil Ginsburg, the department's general manager, declined a request to be interviewed.



Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

Melissa Lory once cared for two orangutans at the San Francisco Zoo. She and another former keeper have taken issue with what they say was inadequate space at the zoo for the orangutans.

The city is hoping to boost the profile of the zoo with the addition of giant pandas from China, though whether that will happen is unclear. Hosting the pandas would be a "great win," Poole said.

Aftermath of a mauling

The ongoing turmoil at the zoo comes more than 16 years after a tragedy that prompted a management upheaval. Around closing time on Christmas evening in 2007, a Siberian tiger named Tatiana escaped her enclosure, killing a 17-year-old guest, Carlos Eduardo Sousa Jr., and mauling his two friends before being shot and killed by police. The same tiger had mauled zookeeper Lori Komejan a year earlier, permanently damaging her hand and arm.

The zoo settled a lawsuit with Sousa's family for an undisclosed amount and later settled another lawsuit with his friends, brothers Kulbir and Amritpal Dhaliwal, for \$900,000, sources told the Chronicle at the time. The zoo renovated the tiger enclosure after its walls were found to be 4 feet lower than national standards when the attack occurred. Komejan also settled a lawsuit with the city of San Francisco for an undisclosed sum.



Landsat/Copernicus, Google Earth

Bear territory

The San Francisco Zoo features two grizzly bears at Grizzly Gulch. The bears' dens are in a concrete enclosure that is part of an adjoining grotto, which dates back to the Great Depression.



Todd Trumbull/The Chronicle

Tanya Peterson, a former lawyer for Hewlett-Packard who had served on the zoo's board, was brought in as interim director in June 2008. She was

charged with taking over an institution beset by what the zoo's board chair told the Chronicle at the time was a "horrific communication and morale crisis."

Peterson stayed on and became CEO and executive director, a post she still holds at a \$339,500 annual salary as of the 2022 fiscal year. Through Poole, she declined an interview request.

Tensions between staff and management that were present before Peterson's tenure have continued.

Workers' criticisms of Peterson extend beyond animal care practices. They cite the zoo's recent hiring of her daughter as a paid intern at a time when the zoo had cut back on internships, and of her fiancé, Gregory Dayton, to perform concerts there. Payments made to both were confirmed by Vitus Leung, the zoo's deputy director. Recruitment and interview guidelines given to hiring managers at the zoo, and obtained by the Chronicle, state that "employment decisions are based on merit" and recommend "blind" hiring.

Some employees note that until recently, Peterson's main Facebook photo showed her lying on a beach just a few feet from a seal, though federal guidelines say that "Taking 'selfies' with seals or sea lions from close distances is illegal."

Peterson did not respond to a request for comment on these complaints.

"The board has great confidence in the leadership of Tanya Peterson," said Elena Asturias, who left the board in March after being a community representative for 20 years. She praised Peterson's fundraising abilities and said the zoo is a complex public-private partnership with stakeholders "bonded together by love of animals."

Some staff concerns are similar to those that arose during contract negotiations in April 2014. Members of the zoo's union then cast a vote of no-confidence in Peterson, saying in a letter to the zoo's board that the director "promoted a punitive/retaliatory culture" and "failed to provide proper oversight and senior management accountability on safety issues." The letter said that panic buttons were found to be faulty in some "code red" animal enclosures — defined as holding the most dangerous animals such as big cats, rhinos, great apes and grizzlies. After a

Zoo continues on A13



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ZOO

From page A12

16-month-old gorilla named Kabibe was fatally crushed under a downward-closing door later in 2014, five employees told the Chronicle that they had brought up safety concerns before her death. An outside investigator determined that the door system needed to be replaced, and the USDA fined the zoo \$1,750. Both said that workers could not see the door opening clearly, which made it difficult to determine whether the gorilla was out of harm's way.

In an opinion piece published in the Chronicle at the time, Peterson said that USDA inspectors had previously found the area to be safe. "Nothing in recent inspection reports gave me reason to believe there was anything wrong with the exhibit," she wrote.

Three years later, animal care staff clashed with Peterson over the care of a Patas monkey with a debilitating tumor on its face. When the staff decided it was time to euthanize the animal, Peterson disagreed, according to Sherwood, the former keeper. She said the CEO's decision caused suffering by delaying the procedure for almost a week. "She has no animal background, then she's making the final decisions on (an animal's) health. That's just crazy," Sherwood said in a recent interview.

In a statement to the Chronicle at the time, Peterson said, "There was no delay. The protocol and process is based on review by the zoo's team of medical and behavioral advisers."

Following the incident, a USDA inspector found two "noncritical" instances of the zoo being out of compliance, including lacking an attending veterinarian during the month when the monkey grew ill, which "could be detrimental to the welfare of the animals." The report stated that zoo veterinarians "do not currently have the adequate authority to make animal welfare decisions regarding humane euthanasia of animals."

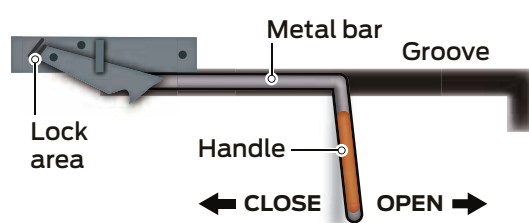
In August 2018, in another incident not previously reported, former keeper Cassianni said zookeepers had a frightening experience with an animal in the

Changes to doors on bear dens

After an incident in which a door was mistakenly left open and a bear chased a zookeeper, the zoo made changes that reduced confusion about the position of the doors.

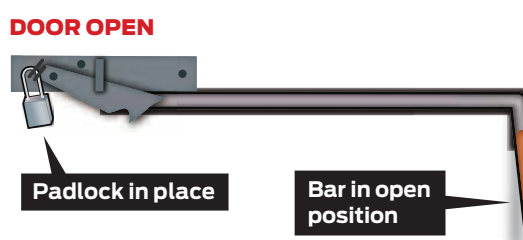
HOW THEY WORK

The door to the bear den is operated by a mechanism from an adjoining room. To open or close the door, a zookeeper slides a metal bar horizontally through a groove built into the wall.



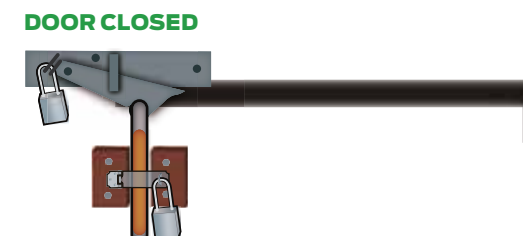
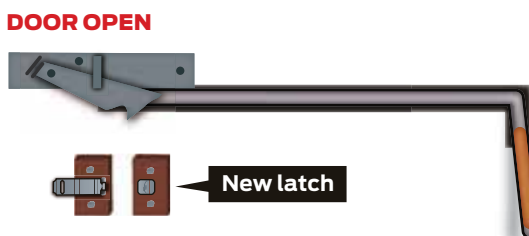
BEFORE THE CHANGE

The door's lock could be fastened even with the bar — and thus the door — in the open position.



AFTER THE CHANGE

New latches were installed on the wall to make sure that keepers close the den doors before locking them. The walls were also painted with new labels to aid recognition.



Source: Chronicle reporting

Todd Trumbull/The Chronicle

same "code red" category as the grizzly bear: a 9-year-old male gorilla named Hasani.

Cassianni said she was working in the gorilla building with a co-worker when she heard him say, "Hasani, no!" She turned and saw the 200-pound ape pulling a hydraulic door open several inches, an incident she recorded in a zookeeper log. The keepers were able to distract Hasani and move him safely to another space, Cassianni said. Later, a technician found that the door had malfunctioned because it was leaking hydraulic fluid, according to zookeeper logs, which also showed that the same door had malfunctioned and been repaired twice in the previous months.

If the zookeepers had been in an adjacent space where they often worked and Hasani had been able to open the door fully, "It could have been catastrophic," Cassianni said.

The zoo did not comment on the incident.

Maintenance is a constant challenge for almost all zoos,

said Kristina Horback, an associate professor at the UC Davis Department of Animal Science, who was not familiar with specific incidents at the San Francisco Zoo. "In zoos I've worked with, they're always having something broken," she said. However, she said, "Anything related to gating or security? That would be a priority for fixing."

Cramped quarters for orangutans

Lory's first job when she arrived at the zoo in 2019 was to care for a pair of orangutans, a male and female named Ollie and Amoi (later renamed Berani and Judy), that had just been brought in from other zoos. They'd been placed in a primate exhibit built in the 1950s, where they would stay for two years before renovations for the space were complete, according to zoo records.

The facility's low ceilings did not leave enough room for the orangutans to swing with their arms, which is their natural

form of movement, said Lory and Cassianni. Cassianni described the indoor facility as dark and littered with rat feces, requiring keepers to set traps for the rodents each night. During their first six months there, the orangutans' only outdoor access was to overhead walkways, according to Lory. That is where the male, Ollie, spent most of his time, and where discarded food, tangled blankets and his waste piled up, Lory said.

"We were all just floored that the zoo thought this was an adequate space for those animals," Cassianni said.

In December 2019, the orangutans were able to start alternating use of an outdoor yard with the chimpanzees, zoo records show. It would be an additional 18 months until they had their own yard, Lory said. However, she said, sharing the yard was problematic because the orangutans could go there only a few times a week, when the chimps would lose access to the space. Poole shared the report from a February 2020 USDA inspec-

tion of the chimpanzees' housing, which the zoo passed. He did not comment specifically on the orangutans' situation. In her June 2021 newsletter, when Peterson announced the opening of the orangutans' yard, she wrote that construction had been delayed by the pandemic.

"Like all zoos, the San Francisco Zoo continuously works to update all of our exhibits to ensure the best habitat for our animals," Poole said in an email.

Ashe, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums CEO, said it's fairly common for zoos to keep animals in temporary housing. "Zoos are constantly in a state of improvement," he said, speaking generally. "But the same standards apply."

The Oakland Zoo does not bring in animals from other zoos until their exhibit is fully built, said Colleen Kinzley, Oakland's vice president of animal care, conservation and research. The exception is when the zoo accepts animals that need immediate rescue, such as a case of a black bear and her cubs, which would have otherwise been euthanized and were kept in a temporary space for several months.

"Normally we know what the timing is going to be, so we are ready for them," she said. "We don't bring them in if we're not ready."

Last June, the San Francisco Zoo had another serious incident previously unknown to the public, again involving a door, when a 1-year-old Magellanic penguin named Handy Harry was killed in the river otter exhibit where he lived.

"While securing the penguins at the old otter pool inside for pool cleaning, the guillotine shift door slipped and hit 'Handy Harry.' He quickly declined and was rushed to the hospital," read the zookeeper log that day. "Died at the hospital."

Handy Harry had made his debut 10 months earlier at the zoo's annual March of the Penguins for new chicks. The heavy door, which moves vertically, was intended for larger animals, and its placement made it difficult for keepers to see the penguins as they passed under it, said one of the former employees.

Zoo continues on A14

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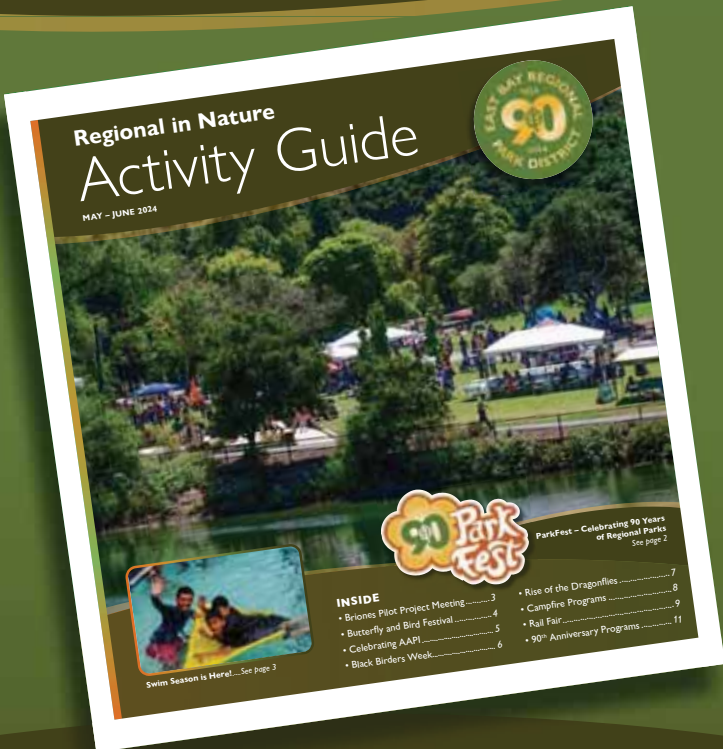
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ZOO

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ees who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The zoo's bird department lacked full staffing one-third of the time that month but was fully staffed that day, according to union records.

Poole said in emails that the ratio of birds and reptiles to keepers at the zoo has decreased to 33.1 animals per keeper, compared with 35.7 five years ago.

He said Handy Harry's death was discussed at a monthly meeting between members of the zoo board and San Francisco Recreation and Park commissioners.

"The S.F. Zoo proudly maintains one of the largest and most successful breeding colon(ies) of Magellanic penguins under human care," Poole said. "While we celebrate our successes, we acknowledge a rare and unfortunate incident in June 2023 when we lost a juvenile."

In February, the remaining penguins in the river otter exhibit were moved to the main penguin colony, zookeeper logs show.

The close call

In the grizzly bear grotto, each of the two dens has a sliding door that is operated from the adjoining keeper's room. A metal bar slides one way to close the door and the other way to open it, allowing keepers to manipulate the door from a safe distance.

At the time Kiona got out of her den last spring, the door's lock could be fastened while the bar was in the open position, said Hallman, who was told about the locking system by employees, and Shields. The space was dark, Hallman said, making it more difficult to see if the bar was in the closed position.

The morning Kiona got out, the keeper had fastened the locking mechanism while failing to close the door of the den, and a second person who was assigned to check the door also did not notice that it was open before leaving the area, said Shields, who worked at the zoo for 17 months.

The zoo initially suspended the keeper who ran from the bear and fired the other employee, but after the union filed grievances, both employees were suspended for two weeks without pay, said Hallman, who represented the employees in disciplinary proceedings afterward.

The zookeepers involved declined to be interviewed. The zoo would not provide any reports on the incident, citing employee confidentiality.

In the months following the incident, the zoo made changes to the bear enclosure, including painting the walls a lighter color and spray-painting new "Open" and "Closed" signs to help keepers see clearly if the door is secure, according to zookeeper logs and employees. New latches now ensure the keepers close the den doors before locking them, said Hallman, who was told about the changes by union members.

The zoo did not comment on changes made to the enclosure.

Four months after the incident, in September, USDA inspectors made a surprise visit to the zoo following an anonymous complaint, department spokesperson Andre Bell said in an email. The USDA provided the Chronicle a copy of the complaint — which was made by Shields about the bear incident — as well as the resulting inspection report.

The inspector did not find any compliance issues and wrote, "the incident was described as a

personnel issue." The report said the keeper involved would no longer work with the zoo's most dangerous animals. "The inspectors found staff members working in areas with 'code red animals' with limited experience," the report stated, "(but) the staff working in those areas had completed the training necessary and were found to be competent to be working in those areas."

Shields said the zoo did not report the incident to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, though it was required to do so. The zoo did not comment on this allegation.

"If a keeper ended up in a space where a dangerous animal was, we would expect a report," said Ashe, the association's CEO. He declined to say whether or not the San Francisco Zoo had made a report, but said in a statement that reports are required "anytime a dangerous animal escapes primary containment, or accesses an area it is not authorized to be in, regardless of whether or not the animal reaches a public area."

Ashe said it would be unusual for the public not to find out about an animal escape.

Poole said the bear did not leave its containment area. When asked to explain that statement, given that the bear appeared in the keeper area in the video, he did not answer.

About six weeks after Kiona got out of her den, Shields said, a zoo guest approached him. On the day of the incident, the guest and his wife said they had seen a keeper running who told them to leave the zoo grounds because a bear had gotten out. Why, the guest wanted to know, had he never heard anything about it on the news?

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