



City Council Health Committee Hearing on The State of Animal Rescue and Introduction 1018

Testimony of Alexandra Silver, Director of the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare
September 13, 2024

Good morning, Chair Schulman, Councilmember Brannan, and members of the Health Committee. My name is Alexandra Silver and I have the honor of serving as Director of the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare. I'm joined by Risa Weinstock, President and CEO of Animal Care Centers of New York City (ACC), and Corinne Schiff, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Environmental Health at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, both of whom will also offer testimony.

I am grateful to the City Council for recognizing that animal rescue is a significant subject worthy of government's attention, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

New York City has had an animal welfare liaison in the Mayor's Office since 2015, and since 2020, the first mayoral Office of Animal Welfare in the country. By creating this dedicated entity—and I thank Councilmember Brannan for his bill calling for it, and the Council for their support—we have elevated animal welfare considerations in city government and can stand as a model for other municipalities. There is much potential for growth, but I am heartened by this Office's ability to connect with agencies across the city on a wide variety of issues affecting animals, and—by extension, affecting people.

The well-being of animals does not exist in a vacuum; it is both impacted by and impacts many factors, and it is linked with the well-being of people. Animal shelters, rescue groups and individual rescuers in New York City and across the country are experiencing challenges that reflect broader issues. When we talk about animal rescue, we are talking about financial pressures and housing challenges facing animal guardians. We are talking about veterinary workforce shortages and lack of access to resources for people with pets.

As liaison for the city regarding animal welfare needs and concerns, I hear from and speak frequently with New Yorkers directly involved in animal rescue. We are fortunate in New York City to have many wonderful nonprofit organizations and compassionate individuals committed to helping both animals and the people who love them.

One of those organizations is Animal Care Centers of NYC, which is contracted by the New York City Health Department to operate our city's open-admissions animal shelters, and which also partners with an impressive network of other animal welfare organizations. As I stated the last time I appeared before this committee, and I wholeheartedly reiterate now, the Adams Administration appreciates the hard work and dedication of ACC staff. It is essential that we continue to support ACC, and all New Yorkers can join in their mission of ending animal homelessness, by adopting, fostering, volunteering, or encouraging others to do so.

This Administration is committed to helping get that message out, sharing information about adoption and fostering opportunities in newsletters and social media; including dogs available for adoption from ACC partners at press events; and facilitating opportunities for ACC to conduct outreach. Mayor Adams has hosted and participated in "Kitty Hall" and "City Howl" adoption events at City Hall, joined in the opening of the new Staten Island Animal Care Center, and filmed videos to help promote the importance of adopting, fostering, and volunteering. In our recent "Summer of Possibility" campaign

highlighting various activities and resources, we included “Adopting a Pet,” with the campaign landing page linking to ACC’s website.

Adopting a dog, cat, rabbit or guinea pig from an ACC shelter is now something that Queens residents are, at long last, able to do in their own borough, along with looking for their lost pets. Earlier this week we celebrated the opening of the Paul A. Vallone Queens Animal Care Center, the first full-service animal shelter in Queens. It was wonderful to see Chair Schulman there, and we thank the Council for all they did to make this center a reality. I know I am far from alone in wishing that former Councilmember Vallone, whose compassion for and advocacy on behalf of animals was an inspiration, could have stood with us to cut the ribbon.

Those of us who are familiar with the older centers, built in and for another century, can most appreciate the progress this new facility reflects. On a recent visit, I almost jumped for joy when I saw a sign by a room in the medical department that said “Dentistry.” (People who work and volunteer at ACC and in animal rescue understand why this is so exciting). I am thrilled by the rooms accommodating multiple cats, enabling them to socialize and explore, and the retractable skylight over many of the dog kennels, allowing for light and fresh air. We are aware of some recent concerns regarding conditions at the new center, but it is truly a remarkable, beautiful building that will make for a better animal, adopter, pet-owner, employee, and volunteer experience.

Meanwhile, the New York City Department of Design and Construction is managing ACC capital projects at three other sites. Construction of the new full-service Bronx Animal Care Center is moving along, and as with the Queens center, when it is complete it will bring an essential community resource to a previously underserved borough. The Brooklyn Animal Care Center is undergoing a total renovation, and the new Manhattan Pet Adoption Center is anticipated to open this fall. We marked the opening of the current Staten Island Animal Care Center in 2022.

In coming years, we will have full-service animal shelters in every borough, and welcoming facilities that will vastly improve the adoption experience, encouraging more New Yorkers to play a part in animal rescue. This is an essential component to ensuring the safety and welfare of companion animals in New York City.

But as stated earlier, animal rescue is part of a larger ecosystem, and in addition to improved facilities and promoting pet adoption and fostering, we must do what we can to prevent animals from needing shelter and rescue in the first place.

Leaders in the animal-sheltering field across the country are emphasizing the importance of keeping pets and people together, thereby reducing shelter intake. Doing so means helping animal guardians access resources, and doing our best to adjust policies so that they reflect our understanding that pets are family.

Mayor Adams’ two appointees to ACC’s Board of Directors have each demonstrated a deep commitment to helping people and pets stay together. Prior to focusing on such efforts in her current position with the Humane Society of the United States, Aleah Simpson helped build ACC’s surrender prevention program. Christine Kim—who was the first director of the Mayor’s Office of Animal Welfare—is the founder of My Dog is My Home, a national nonprofit organization that highlights and helps preserve the bonds between people experiencing homelessness and their companion animals.

We marked a milestone in New York City just this spring when the Department of Homeless Services joined with the nonprofit Urban Resource Institute (URI) to launch a pet-inclusive pilot program at a shelter for families experiencing homelessness, ensuring their four-legged family members can be kept with them. URI has led the way in keeping families together with their People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program at many of their shelters for survivors of domestic violence.

Also this year, the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare joined the newly created interagency Tenant Protection Cabinet, which aims "to better serve tenants by creating pathways to renter-focused programs and services, and to ensure safe and fair housing conditions." Our Office was eager to take part in such a cabinet, since housing-related challenges are a major contributor to the high populations that animals shelters across the country are experiencing. One of the initiatives that the cabinet is working on is a flyer to raise awareness specifically about protections for tenants with pets and assistance animals.

The Office of Animal Welfare is also exploring ways to make housing more pet-inclusive—more accessible to people with pets of all sizes, for example—to begin with. Doing so would not only enable more animals to stay with the families who already love them, but also widen the pool of potential adopters.

Efforts to keep pets and people together can also help address New York City's overpopulation of outdoor cats without owners, as it is likely that some of those community cats would have remained inside if families had had access to resources to care for them.

Among the places community cats call home are New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments across the five boroughs. At the end of last year, NYCHA awarded a contract to a leading New York City cat rescue organization to provide trap-neuter-release (also known as trap-neuter-return, or TNR) services to help manage this population. This is an important step.

As noted in our 2023 annual report, addressing street cat overpopulation requires a multifaceted approach, and it is essential that New Yorkers who have cats get them spayed or neutered and not let them roam outside. We recognize that affordable spay/neuter resources in New York City—for both owned and community cats—are limited and we continue to explore ways to improve accessibility.

Access to affordable veterinary care in general—not just spay/neuter—is also very much on our radar. This is a challenge for animal guardians, rescuers and shelters across the country, as we face not just high costs of care but a veterinary workforce shortage as well.

City funding for the new Queens ACC includes more than \$1 million for a veterinary clinic that will serve pet owners who, but for assistance with veterinary care, would have to relinquish their animal to ACC. Such a clinic is another significant step.

We have connected with those who run existing nonprofit clinics for companion animals, veterinary practitioners, LaGuardia Community College's veterinary technician program, and others invested in access to care, and we will continue to engage on this.

Earlier this year, Mayor Adams met with a Long Island University College of Veterinary Medicine student who had been awarded a scholarship designed to enhance diversity within the veterinary profession.

This scholarship, facilitated by the Administration, was made possible through the efforts of the Brady Hunter Foundation and Harlem Week.

Ultimately, helping more animals means helping one another, and coming together as a community to address several long-standing and deeply rooted issues.

We plan to sponsor capacity-building workshops and trainings tailored to animal rescue organizations to learn more about opportunities for securing city funding as well as to explore existing avenues for public funding.

The Office has also encouraged, and will continue to encourage, nonprofit organizations involved in animal rescue to register and share foster and other volunteer opportunities on the NYC Service website. Organizations can also post in-kind donation wish lists on this platform, where we are eager to see more animal welfare organizations represented.

Circling back to the role pet adoption plays in animal rescue: animals, rescuers, and shelters would benefit greatly if more people chose to adopt. We expect and are hopeful that the significant New York state legislation prohibiting the sale of dogs and cats in retail pet stores, which takes effect this December, will contribute to increased adoptions. We are interested in learning more about the Council legislation currently under consideration, Introduction 1018, which also addresses the sale of animals, and look forward to discussing details of this bill further with you.

Thank you for your attention and support in addressing animal welfare. We look forward to your questions and continuing our collaboration to improve the lives of animals across New York City. I will now turn it over to Risa Weinstock of ACC.