



City Council Health Committee Hearing on Int. 04 - Guinea Pigs
Testimony of Alexandra Silver, Director of the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare
December 14, 2022

Good morning, Chairperson Schulman, Council Member Ayala, and members of the Health Committee. My name is Alexandra Silver and I am Director of the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare. I'm grateful that the City Council is taking up this legislation concerning guinea pigs and appreciate the opportunity to testify in its favor. I'm joined by Risa Weinstock, President and CEO of Animal Care Centers of New York City (ACC), who will also offer testimony, and Corinne Schiff, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Environmental Health at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

As laid out in the City Charter, the Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare has the power to "advise and assist the mayor in the coordination and cooperation among agencies under the jurisdiction of the mayor that are involved in animal welfare administration, regulation, management or programs." A wide variety of issues fall under this purview, including but not limited to those surrounding wildlife management, exotic animals, and animal abuse, as well as animal shelters, animal population control, and pet shops.

In New York City, several agencies—including the Health Department, Parks Department and NYPD—are responsible for animal-related issues. Many additional agencies—for example, the Department of Social Services and NYCHA—come across animal issues during their operations. This Office is positioned to both raise awareness among other offices and agencies regarding animal welfare issues and resources, and work with them to improve animal welfare protocols. Another important function of the Office is to "serve as liaison for the city regarding animal welfare needs and concerns."

One such concern is the large number of guinea pigs being brought to ACC, which is contracted by the Health Department to operate the city's animal shelter system. As Ms. Weinstock can speak to more directly, the increase in guinea pigs in recent years has been an added strain on the organization, which is charged with a daunting task.

ACC is the only open-admissions animal-sheltering organization in the city. It accepts all animals regardless of medical condition, behavior, or age. A variety of species come to ACC, from a variety of sources. Some are stray animals with unknown histories, while many are surrendered by owners who can no longer care for them. Animals may be brought to ACC by members of the public, NYPD officers and Parks employees, as well as by ACC's own rescue specialists.

The Administration appreciates the hard work and dedication of ACC staff. Running the open-admissions animal shelter system in a city of nearly nine million people is challenging enough, without the added burden of operating during a pandemic. As ACC strives to end animal homelessness in New York City, it's important we recognize the role the broader community plays in such a mission. ACC did not create the high numbers of guinea pigs coming into its shelters and cannot be expected to solve the issue on its own.

Intro 4 is a common-sense effort to address a concrete problem. While it would ban the sale of guinea pigs in pet shops, it would not prohibit New Yorkers from keeping guinea pigs as pets, and guinea pigs could still be adopted through a humane society, animal shelter, or animal rescue group. ACC currently

adopts out guinea pigs, as well as rabbits, cats, and dogs. ACC and other animal welfare organizations frequently host adoption events across the city in partnership with pet stores and other venues.

Guinea pigs can make wonderful companion animals, but, like any pet, they come with responsibilities, and the decision to bring one home should not be taken lightly. One benefit of adopting a companion animal from ACC is the counseling that comes along with it, and the connection with the organization in case any questions or concerns about animal care come up down the line.

While promoting adoption is essential, animal-sheltering across the country over the past several years has focused more and more on preventing animals from coming into shelters in the first place, and not just on rehoming efforts. Helping people keep their pets is a prime goal of ACC and other leaders in animal-sheltering. The bottom line is that it's not enough to focus only on increasing adoptions or finding alternative placements with rescue groups. We must also address root causes.

The Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare appreciates the City Council's acting on this issue and seeking a solution that both protects the wellbeing of guinea pigs and could help alleviate difficult conditions in animal shelters. Thank you again for the opportunity to address this proposed legislation. We are looking forward to discussing the details of the bill further with you. I will now turn it over to my colleague, Risa Weinstock of ACC, to deliver her testimony.