



**Testimony**

of

**Daniel Kass, MSPH  
Deputy Commissioner, Division of Environmental Health  
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Health**

On

Oversight - Animal Care and Control: Recent Progress and Opportunities for Improvement in the  
NYC Animal Shelter System

And

Intro 485-2014 - A Local Law to amend the Administrative code of the City of New York,  
in relation to Animal Shelters.

**February 25, 2015  
250 Broadway, 14<sup>th</sup> Floor, Committee Room  
New York City**

Good morning, Chairman Johnson and members of the Health Committee. My name is Daniel Kass, and I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Environmental Health at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined by Mario Merlino, the Department's Assistant Commissioner overseeing veterinary health. On behalf of Commissioner Bassett, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

As you know, the Department has recently testified before the Council on a number of animal welfare-related issues. We testified in support of Local Law 15, which requires pet shops that sell dogs and cats to obtain a permit from the Department. That law also directs our agency to enforce provisions related to animal welfare, the sourcing of animals, and the conditions of their sale. We are currently in the process of developing rules related to the permitting and enforcement provisions of the legislation. In addition, we testified before the Committee on State & Federal Legislation, on a bill that would empower New York City to set its own dog licensing fees. I want to thank the Council for the Home Rule message that was delivered to Albany in support of that effort, and I am pleased to report that State legislation was signed into law in December. We now look forward to partnering with Council on legislation that will enhance dog licensing efforts. Other recent collaborations between our Department and the Council include establishing the Animal Population Control Fund, which disburses monies collected from the licensing of unsterilized dogs to support free spay and neuter services for dogs and cats for low-income New Yorkers. Thank you, Chair Johnson, and thank you to all members of this committee, for your work on these initiatives.

The Health Department oversees the animal sheltering system, which is administered by its contractor, Animal Care and Control of New York City (AC&C). AC&C provides field rescue services and accepts, cares for, and temporarily shelters abandoned or unwanted animals before finding them permanent homes. AC&C runs the only open-admissions shelter in New York City, which means that it never turns away any abandoned or stray animal. AC&C receives more than 30,000 cats, dogs, rabbits, small mammals, reptiles, birds, farm and wild animals each year. It is the only organization in New York City trusted with this responsibility.

The City is making significant progress in meeting the commitments required by Local Law 59, which was passed into law in 2011. Over the last five years, the Council, the Health Department, and AC&C have worked together to transform the City's approach to animal care. These efforts have resulted in a shelter system that is better funded, and better performing, than at any other time in its history.

AC&C operates three full service shelters, two receiving centers, a mobile adoption center and a robust field response unit. At full-service shelters, animals are housed, fed, treated and cared for. At these shelters, animals can be placed in homes in a number of ways: adoption directly from the shelter; transfer to one of AC&C's partner organizations, which in turn places the animals; or adoption at off-site events, through AC&C's mobile adoption center. Before AC&C accepts an animal, it interviews people to determine the cause for the surrender, and may provide veterinary care or guidance on strategies that enable the person to keep their pet. Some animals that are sick and suffering are humanely euthanized at their owner's request, often because they do not have or cannot afford a veterinarian to humanely euthanize their animal. Some animals are euthanized because an animal has behavioral issues or illnesses that make it difficult to place the animal in a home.

AC&C operates centers in the Bronx and Queens where animals may be dropped off. Animals are transferred from these facilities, multiple times a day, to the full-service shelters. All animals adopted by New Yorkers from AC&C are spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and micro chipped, and all dogs are licensed. AC&C also maintains partnerships with 289 rescue organizations, which are required to sterilize the animals and license the dogs before placing the animals in an adoptive home. AC&C provides other services that support the humane treatment of animals, promotes responsible pet ownership, and helps reduce the number of unwanted animals.

The funding AC&C receives is a critical measure of support for its work, but how that money is used and what it achieves is also important to assess. Since 2011, AC&C has nearly doubled its staff, with significant increases in the number of veterinarians and licensed veterinary technicians and the hiring of a chief veterinarian and a medical director. Funding is also provided for a well-staffed behavioral assessment unit at the shelters, which enables AC&C to better assess dogs and ensure they are placed in the proper home. By physically segregating the surrender of animals from their adoption, AC&C is now able to interview people surrendering animals, and better understand each pet's unique qualities and needs and provide better customer service to the thousands of people who adopt animals.

AC&C, with the City's support, now opens its shelters and receiving centers to the public seven days a week, 12 hours a day. In addition, the Manhattan shelter is open for emergencies 24 hours per day. Staff members are present at the shelters all day and night, every day of the year. The contract with AC&C requires that it conduct field rescue and pickup operations 12 hours per day, and overnight for emergencies. I am pleased to report that the City has exceeded its commitment to increase AC&C's budget. In 2011, AC&C was funded at \$7.1 million. Since that time, AC&C's budget now exceeds \$13 million, reflecting an 82 percent increase in funding. Despite repeated budget cuts to the Department, the funding to AC&C *increased* in each of the last four years. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the exceptional leadership of Risa Weinstock, the Executive Director of AC&C, who has managed this significant expansion.

Earlier this year, the Administration announced several additional enhancements to support continued improvements in the shelter system. The City will spend \$8.5 million on a variety of upgrades to the shelter system. Funding is being provided to reengineer the heating and ventilation system at the Brooklyn shelter to create more isolated fresh air zones and improve overall climate control. In Manhattan, the Health Department, in conjunction with AC&C and its partners, will design and construct a dedicated adoption center that will improve customer service, enable more interaction between animals and their prospective adopters, and free up more space for the care and sheltering of animals. The Administration is also providing funding to increase the fleet of mobile adoption units used by AC&C, dedicating them to the Bronx and Queens to improve local adoption options. Funds have also been provided to enhance AC&C's ability to fundraise from private sources.

New York City's shelter system was originally built and managed by the American Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals. When the shelters were turned over to the City, the live release rate was around 30 percent. Today, the live release is 80.7 percent, making our shelter system among the most successful of any big city in the United States.

Many challenges remain in managing the City's unwanted animal population. Cats continue to produce litters that exceed the number of people who want to own or adopt them.

Dogs are abandoned at far higher rates in some neighborhoods than others. Together, the Health Department and AC&C are working to better understand these issues, and to direct staff and funding resources to address them. This year, the Department will provide \$505,000 to organizations to perform free spay and neuter services in neighborhoods with the greatest rates of abandonment. Other organizations around the City provide targeted spay and neuter services, and without them, we are sure the problem of abandonment would be far worse. New York City has a comparatively low rate of intake at its municipal shelter, owing in part to lower pet ownership rates, but also to the exceptional and coordinated work of hundreds of organizations dedicated to rescuing and finding homes for abandoned animals.

The City, working alongside the Council, has made significant improvements to the animal shelter system across New York City. We look forward to building on those successes. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your continued partnership on this issue. We are happy to answer any questions.