Testimony

of

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before the

New York City Council Committee on Health

on

Oversight: Animal Shelters; and Intro. 401

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Good morning Chairperson Levine, Councilmember Vallone and members of the Health Committee. My name is Corinne Schiff, and I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Environmental Health at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. On behalf of Commissioner Bassett, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department’s animal shelter work. Testifying with me today is Risa Weinstock, President and CEO of Animal Care Centers of New York City.

One of the important missions of the Department is to promote and protect human health by working to prevent, discover, and intervene in cases of animal-borne diseases. The scope of our veterinary public health work is broad and ranges from inspecting animal handling facilities to investigating animal nuisance complaints and monitoring wildlife and domestic animals for diseases that can impact human health. Today I will speak specifically to our work as it relates to animal shelters.

The Department is charged with managing and caring for the City’s population of owner-surrendered, abandoned, homeless and lost animals. In 1995, the City created a nonprofit entity – now known as Animal Care Centers or ACC – to operate the animal shelter system. The services the Department carries out through a contract with ACC include receiving and sheltering animals, providing medical services, and animal placement. ACC also performs a vital public safety function by handling potentially dangerous animals; accepting suspected rabid animals for observation or preparation for testing; and working with City and State agencies in wildlife management. ACC performs these services by operating full-service animal shelters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, admissions centers in the Bronx and Queens, and field operations throughout the city. ACC is required to accept all animals, without regard to their condition, age, temperament, or adoptability.

The improvements in the animal shelter system during the de Blasio administration have been dramatic. In 2015, the placement rate in the City’s shelter system was 80%. Today, ACC is a national leader among municipalities, with a placement rate in 2017 of over 93%. ACC’s innovative programming has been recognized around the country, and an invigorated, independent board of directors has enabled the organization to increase private fundraising and deepen its marketing and promotion strategies. ACC has developed strong partnerships with animal welfare organizations such as the ASPCA, and the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, as well as hundreds of “New Hope” organizations. These partners provide support every day and worked closely with us just over a year ago when we mobilized a rapid and life-saving response to the cat influenza outbreak.

I will let Ms. Weinstock speak to the impressive developments in ACC operations, and will now provide details about the City’s expanded capital investments. The de Blasio Administration is a strong supporter of ACC. The Administration has committed nearly $100
million in capital funding to support new construction or renovations in every borough, including new full-service shelters in the Bronx and Queens. In January, we were excited to announce that, after a long search, the City had secured a site in the Bronx to build a new state-of-the-art animal shelter, and we are starting the public review process for that project at the end of this month. In Staten Island, a newly renovated Care Center will open later this year. Also in the works is the renovation of an existing garage to house a stand-alone adoption center in Manhattan, which will provide an expanded and welcoming space for New Yorkers looking for that just-right, new pet.

In Brooklyn, a substantial renovation of the Brooklyn Care Center will almost double the usable square footage, improve indoor air quality, provide more room for the animals, and fill the space with natural light. And finally, the Department is committed to opening a full-service shelter in Queens and has been actively evaluating locations. We are hopeful that we will soon identify a suitable property. In the meantime, we will relocate the Queens Admission Center to a larger and more accessible space.

The Administration fully supports having a full-service animal shelter in all five boroughs as demonstrated by our on-going commitment to these projects, particularly to opening full service shelters in the Bronx and Queens. This commitment is aligned with requirements of Introduction 401 under consideration today. We support the bill and are pleased to have the Council’s strong support as we plan for those sites.

The transformation at ACC has been due not only to the support of the Council, the Mayor and the Health Commissioner, but, most importantly, to the deep dedication and hard work of the ACC leadership and staff. I want to take just a moment to acknowledge Risa Weinstock and her management staff. They are the best in their field, and, on behalf of Commissioner Bassett, I want to thank them for their service to the people and animals of New York City.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. Ms. Weinstock will testify next, and then I will be happy to take questions.