



Testimony

Of

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**Before the
NYC Council Committee on Health**

**On
Intro 655**

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Good morning Chairperson Arroyo, Council Member Lappin and members of the City Council Health Committee. My name is Daniel Kass, and I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Environmental Health at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. On behalf of Commissioner Farley, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Intro 655. With me is Mario Merlino, our Assistant Commissioner who oversees Veterinary Services, and Julie Bank, Executive Director of Animal Care and Control of New York City.

I would like to begin by providing a brief overview of the Department's public health work as it relates to animals. The Department promotes and protects public health by working to prevent, discover, and intervene in cases of animal-borne diseases, hazards and complaints of animal nuisances. Our functions include issuing state-mandated dog licenses; permitting and inspecting animal handling facilities such as pet shops, animal boarding facilities and pet grooming facilities; licensing commercial horses and issuing permits to boarding stables; receiving and responding to reports of animal bites; and investigating animal nuisance complaints. We monitor both wildlife and domestic animals for diseases, such as rabies, that can impact human health, and issue permits for the exhibition of wild and exotic animals.

The Department is also charged with managing and caring for the City's population of owner-surrendered, abandoned, and lost animals. To that end we operate, by contract with the non-profit Animal Care and Control, animal shelters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, and animal receiving centers in the Bronx and Queens.

Animal Care and Control – AC&C – receives about 40,000 dogs and cats in its facilities every year. It provides the animals with veterinary care and shelters them in hope that they are adopted either directly from the shelter or through the many animal rescue groups affiliated with AC&C. AC&C also holds animals that are being evaluated for rabies and for behavioral problems following attacks on people. Before an animal is adopted from the shelter or returned to his or her owner, AC&C medical personnel spay or neuter the animal as part of a long term strategy to prevent overpopulation and to comply with the sterilization requirements of the Animal Shelter and Sterilization Act. AC&C also conducts field pick-up of animals that present a public health risk.

The Department strongly supports Intro 655 as a significant advance in the City's efforts to provide animal care and control services. Intro 655, which offers amendments to the Animal Shelter and Sterilization Act, is the critical component of a comprehensive agreement to enhance services reached by the Bloomberg Administration, the City Council, AC&C, and community animal organizations including the ASPCA and the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals. Under the agreement, the scope of animal care and control services that the Department provides would be enhanced substantially, and our efforts would focus on increased animal adoption and reduced animal overpopulation through methods other than euthanasia.

Signing Intro 655 into law will enable substantial improvements in operations and increases in financial commitments to the animal shelters. The Administration has pledged that by fiscal year 2014, the annual budget to fund AC&C will exceed \$12 million, a 77% increase above fiscal year 2011 funding. The additional funding will be phased in over three years, with the largest single increase coming in July 2012, and will enable AC&C to hire additional

veterinary, behavioral, animal care and customer service staff. AC&C would expand the days and hours its facilities would be open to the public and concentrate field resources in boroughs with receiving centers.

The expansion of services is made possible not only by the Administration's promise of additional funding but also by a comprehensive plan, initiated with Council support, to increase the percentage of dogs that are licensed. Licensing one's dog is the best way to ensure that a lost pet is returned home and owners are not fined for failure to license. Furthermore, the licensing fee provides critical revenue to support increased services for homeless animals, including services that will be mandated by Intro 655.

The Department estimates that just one in five dogs are licensed, despite State legal mandates that all owners license their dogs. This fall, the Department will launch a media campaign to educate New Yorkers that they must license their dogs. The Department will also launch a web-based pet finder service that enables people who find licensed dogs to provide us with contact information to relay to the registered owner.

At the same time, the Department will work with the Council and animal advocates to increase the dog licensing fee, which has not changed in many decades. The current fee of \$8.50 was intended to provide all the revenue needed to support animal control, care and welfare. Today, the fee falls drastically short of compensating the City for the current costs of issuing a license, which means the fee does not provide any revenue for actual animal services. To rectify this, the City will urge State legislators to raise the fee and enact other changes to facilitate the issuance of licenses. For example, State law currently authorizes third parties, such as pet shops, animal shelters and veterinarians that issue licenses on behalf of the City, to retain just one dollar of the licensure fee. We will seek an increase that makes it worth their while to license dogs, making it even easier for New Yorkers to comply with the law. We also will seek flexibility in how the City issues licenses. For example, other jurisdictions with greater licensure rates provide owners the option of multi-year or lifetime licenses.

Funding for expanded animal welfare services would also come from the considerable savings the City would realize if Intro 655 is enacted. The bill proposes to amend the Animal Shelter and Sterilization Act to require that animal care facilities be open daily in each borough and eliminates the mandate that a full service shelter be open 24 hours each day in all five boroughs. Even without full service shelters in every borough, adoptions increased by 135% between 2005 and 2010 – due largely to the work of animal rescue groups – and euthanasia rates have fallen 49% since 2005. The partnerships that have enabled this to occur will be maintained and strengthened under this bill, and we hope to see ongoing improvement over time. Intro 655 would spare the City the capital expenditures and operational costs required to build, renovate, and staff round-the-clock shelters, allowing the dollars to be leveraged instead to significantly and more immediately enhance the scope and quality of current services.

In particular, Intro 655, if enacted, would do the following:

- Continue to mandate operation of three full-service shelters that would be open every day to accept animals, offer animal adoption, and provide necessary veterinary care and animal sterilization.
- Of these three full service shelters, one would be required to be open to the public 24 hours a day. Based on current practice, the shelters would be located in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, with the Manhattan shelter open 24 hours.
- In the other two boroughs, the amended Animal Shelter and Sterilization Act would require animal-receiving facilities to be maintained seven days a week, twelve hours a day. This would result in a significant increase in services in the Bronx and Queens, which currently have receiving centers open eight hours a day for two days in the Bronx and one day in Queens.
- In addition, Intro 655 would require, for the first time, maintenance of field services to pick up animals from all boroughs, seven days a week, 12 hours a day, and at all hours when public health or safety is threatened. This would represent a significant expansion of field operations, which currently operate weekdays from 9am to 5pm, with a field operator on-call at all hours to assist the police department in emergencies. These receiving and field services would be phased in with added funding and be fully implemented by July 2014.

In setting out this comprehensive plan, the Department and community animal organizations agreed that simply serving homeless, abandoned, and lost animals is not enough. We must do more to prevent animal overpopulation over the long term. These efforts are already underway. Last year, the Department worked with the State legislature to create the Animal Population Control Fund and with the City Council to enable the City to directly support the provision of free or subsidized spay/neuter services. In addition, the City Council passed legislation to increase the license fee for dogs that are not spayed or neutered. The Department issued rules for this fund in the spring, and is now preparing a Request for Proposals to enable organizations and veterinarians to utilize these funds. This fall, the Department's media campaign will also promote animal sterilization as a key component of responsible pet ownership. Over time, we believe that expanded spay/neuter will reduce the population of homeless animals.

Over the last few years, the City has made significant progress reducing dog overpopulation. The number of dogs entering the shelters declined by nearly 15% from 2003 to 2010, dropping from 13,600 to 11,600. AC&C also finds homes for an increasing percentage of dogs: 63% of dogs received at the shelters were adopted or rescued in 2010 compared to only 25% in 2003. We need to make similar progress with the City's cat population. Intro 655 would enact strategies to control cat overpopulation over the long run. Cats comprise nearly two thirds of the total number of animals entering the shelters each year and therefore present a special challenge. There are many more cats in the shelter system than people interested in adopting them.

To reduce cat overpopulation over time, Intro 655 would require cat owners who allow their pets to roam outside to have them sterilized. Unsterilized cats allowed to roam freely often

end up breeding and contributing to overpopulation. In addition, Intro 655 authorizes the Department to promulgate rules to register “trap, neuter, return” programs. Trap, neuter, return is a strategy used by caregivers to ultimately reduce the feral cat population. Cats are trapped, sterilized, vaccinated and tagged, and returned to where they were found.

Many of the changes contained in Intro 655 are made possible by significant progress over the last several years in animal shelter operations. A decade ago, when the Council enacted the Animal Shelter and Sterilization Act, homeless animals were far less likely to be adopted, and far more likely to be euthanized than they are today. Over the last 10 years, however, animal rescue groups, acting in partnership with AC&C, now find new homes for tens of thousands of sheltered animals each year. This significant increase in adoptions resulting from the rescue groups’ efforts, and from AC&C’s in-house adoption program, has increased adoptions and reduced euthanasia. With the goal of increasing adoptions, funds associated with this bill will allow AC&C to add adoption counselors to facilitate matching pets to new owners. Today, the challenge facing the City is the need is to allocate and target resources to keep animals healthy and adoptable and to implement long term strategies that engage pet owners to reduce overpopulation.

At a time when shelters across the country are losing funding, and even closing, I am pleased that New York City will be able to substantially enhance the operating budget and scope of service by focusing on targeted funding and long-term strategies to reduce overpopulation. The comprehensive plan I’ve outlined here and described by Intro 655 reflects the input of many institutions, and I would like to thank Speaker Quinn and her staff , AC&C, the ASPCA and the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC Animals for working to come to a common understanding of the problems and crafting a concrete way to address these problems.

If Intro 655 becomes law, the Department will report to the Council on a variety of indicators that will track our progress. We look forward to sharing that information with you and continuing the Department’s successful collaboration with the City Council and animal advocates. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for considering this legislation. I would be happy to take any questions.