

Mr. Chairman, Senators..... Good evening. My name is Donna Casamento, I am the CEO of Pet Helpers, an Animal Welfare organization serving the Lowlands located at 1447 Folly Rd. in Charleston, SC. We are a 501c3 non-profit Animal Shelter, Adoption Center, and operate a Spay Neuter Clinic. I would like to thank all of you for the opportunity to speak with you here tonight.

Pet Helpers Description:

We have been incorporated and no-kill since 1978. We moved into our current 14,000 square foot facility in Charleston in 2008, where we are occupying 11,000 square feet of that space (with still more to complete). We have state of the art animal living space with 32-34 employees. We have two full time veterinarians on staff, along with a team of highly trained veterinary assistants. It is part of Pet Helpers mission to offer affordable and accessible spaying and neutering and basic health services to the public regardless of income. In addition to providing over 2000 sterilization surgeries each year we offer additional services such as Vaccinations, Micro-chipping, Heartworm and FIV/FeLV testing. Last year we adopted close to 1700 dogs and cats into the community and so far this year we have placed over 1400 dogs and cats into their new homes.

Our facility includes an Adoption and Education Center and the Greer Spay and Neuter Clinic. We also offer several outreach programs to the community, including:

- Trap Neuter and Release (TNR)
- UnChain Charleston where we build fences to change the lives of animals who have previously lived their lives at the end of a chain and educate their owners against this practice
- Food Bank which offers pet food to those who cannot afford to feed their animals

Our shelter, clinic, and programs are something that this community is proud of. Pet Helpers is a destination for visitors and potential new residents considering the move to Charleston, real estate agents tour possible newcomers through our shelter. Volunteers, relocating from other communities, have chosen to move to Charleston and close to Pet Helpers in order to be able to help with our mission.

Our Education programs do a great job of exposing young people to the love of companion animals. We are developing a training program for dog owners to better equip themselves with the skills necessary to train their dogs...making for a more successful home for animals and preventing them from being returned to a shelter due to behavior issues.

Pet Helpers was built with private funding and we are still raising funds to expand our facility. We receive less than 5% percent (less than \$100,000) of our \$2M annual operating budget from local governments. The funds we receive from local agencies enable us to perform much needed TNR services to feral cats and assist local municipalities when strays are surrendered or picked up by Animal Control. Mostly we rely on private donations, targeted fundraising events, grants, revenues from our ReTail Thrift Store, our “AniMall”, and what little income we derive from adoption fees, vaccinations and our clinic.

Our Spay/Neuter Clinic operates under the highest standards and is subject to the same LLR and DHEC regulations that any veterinary practice would be. We have no competitive advantage other than the usual property and corporate tax exemptions that are afforded to a non-profit. Like any other business we would not have a customer base if we did not have good customer service, a clean and healthy facility, compliance with all State and Federal rules and regulations, and a skilled staff.

Animal over population and the endless euthanasia of adoptable dogs and cats in South Carolina.

There is no doubt that the problems surrounding animals in South Carolina are severe and it is no secret that homeowners who move here are surprised and dismayed by the neglect and rampant homeless strays they see and find in many parts of our state.

Charleston has done a great job in changing animal welfare in our community and Pet Helpers, along with Charleston Animal Society and others, have led our community in that effort.

Pet Helpers is committed to making sure that sterilization and basic wellness are affordable and accessible and to educating our youth. **Our hope is that appropriate ordinances and laws will be enacted from local and state government agencies aimed at encouraging and demanding humane treatment and owner responsibility.**

The passage last session of House Bill 3361 referencing Domestic Violence Pet Protection and the amendment of Senator's Verdin's increased penalties for abuse and neglect was a good start. **Putting the worst cases in circuit court for the solicitor's office to prosecute says that South Carolina is taking animal abuse and neglect seriously.**

We further hope that you will consider the next step to be a **statewide requirement that all dogs and cats be micro-chipped for identification.** This would go a long ways towards identifying ownership of lost, abandoned, and vicious animals that end up in the shelter system or that are a problem for law enforcement. It would it would add another layer of accountability and provide at least some possibility of tracking ownership.

Shelter and Rescue oversight:

- We realize that there are a lot of well-meaning people creating rescues and trying to help with the problems facing animals in our society, but we also know there are unscrupulous people who are saying that they are operating a rescue when all they are really doing is dealing in the sale of animals to generate income with total disregard for the mental or physical health of the animals in their care OR they are hiring themselves out to transport dogs to other states, but not doing it safely.
- Good people who start out trying to help a few dogs, can soon get overwhelmed and find themselves hoarding animals in unhealthy conditions.
- There are many good breeders out there but there are also many back yard breeders...especially of the small dog variety...who frequently house dogs in cramped, inhumane living conditions. I have personally seen several of these locations and dealt with the problems facing animals who come from these situations.

There are a lot of different scenarios that could be avoided by **requiring a business license from commercial breeding operations and setting standards for both rescues and shelters.**

Competition among veterinary clinics:

The business model for veterinary care is changing. There are many factors that play into that fact:

- the oversupply of vets graduating from schools,
- burdensome school loans,
- increasing reliance on, and cost of technology,
- availability of online medications and many changes in the types of preventative care that are available from drug manufacturers.
- shelter/rescues are spaying or neutering 100% of their animals before adoption – and that's where more and more people are getting their animals.

The blame shouldn't be directed at non-profits who are operating with high standards and providing affordable and accessible services to people regardless of income. In our challenging economic times often the first expense to be put aside when finances become tight is the care for animals. Many families are reaching out to help solve the overpopulation problems in our state and don't have just one dog or cat anymore....they have 5-6 that they probably took in as rescues. That is expensive even for upper income households. The cost of care for one animal per year can easily exceed \$1000.

Pet Helpers only offers spay/neuter and basic wellness services to the community. Whenever we are contacted by the public needing care for their animals we gladly refer them to local veterinary clinics. Our hope is to better partner with local veterinarians.

What small business owner wouldn't benefit from a partner that was putting more than 1700 potential new clients into the community each year? We all need to be working together.

SUMMARY

We are facing big issues in the state of South Carolina surrounding Animal Welfare. It is only by working together, elected officials, veterinarians, and Animal Welfare organizations that we can hope to solve those challenges and ensure we provide a caring, healthy, and safe place for animals in our state.

Thank you for your time and attention.