



**Testimony of Dan D’Eramo, Director of Field Services, Humane Rescue Alliance before the Committee on Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment, Prince George’s County, Maryland**

Thursday, June 13, 2019

Good morning, Chairwoman Taveras and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak before you today. My name is Dan D’Eramo and I’m the Director of Field Services for the Humane Rescue Alliance, which I will refer to as “HRA.” I have been with HRA for over nine years and I am responsible for overseeing all of our bite investigations and cases involving recommendations for dangerous and potentially dangerous determinations. I am proud to be a resident and home owner in Prince George’s County.

HRA is based in Washington, DC, the only major urban area in the country that has all animal protection programs and services unified in one organization. HRA was established three years ago by the historic merger of two iconic animal welfare organizations: the Washington Humane Society (WHS) and the Washington Animal Rescue League (WARL). Through our legacy organizations, we have protected and served the DC community for more than 150 years and we help more than 60,000 animals annually. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about our experience successfully reversing a breed-specific administrative policy at our legacy organization, the Washington Humane Society that is still in effect today.

When Lisa LaFontaine became CEO of Washington Humane Society in 2007, her first act was to reverse the breed specific policy to euthanize pitbull type dogs. We worked in partnership with our City's leaders to establish an approach that is effective at creating a safe community for people and pets: **Dogs are deemed dangerous or potentially dangerous based on a set of observed, concrete behaviors and criteria, not based on how they look.**

The decision to adopt out pitbull type dogs required many internal conversations and planning. We also proactively engaged the public with the data and science behind the policy reversal. Then, once the decision was made, it took less than two months to implement a new policy where pitbull type dogs were adopted out. We were surprised to discover that the change in policy, transformed our relationship with our community. Instead of fearing us and using our agency as a last resort, our community began to trust us and view us a resource. Our donations increased, more people wanted to volunteer, and our foster program flourished. As a result, we were able to increase our capacity to care for more animals.

The most surprising consequence of the policy reversal was the positive effect it had on our staff. Our staff were no longer forced to euthanize healthy, happy animals and instead were placing them into homes where they could thrive. In a short time, we went from a 30% live release rate to a 50 % live release rate. Today, the HRA has a 90% live release rate. We went from a faltering organization to an organization that celebrates the human animal bond in the work that we do every single day.

We implemented a number of protocols to ensure that adopting out pitbull type dogs was successful. We immediately invested in maintaining a constant presence in the community and working with pet owners to provide improved levels of care to their animals through the provision of resources, guidance, and when necessary, enforcement, to protect both the animals

and the public in the District. The resources we provide to our community include free and low-cost veterinary care, spay and neuter services, behavior treatment, and pet food and supplies.

We also promptly and thoroughly investigate all dog bite incidents, taking action where necessary to protect public safety. The result of these changes has enabled us to identify and prevent problems before they occur.

We receive calls from Prince George's County residents every single day who want to surrender their pet to us or are seeking to access our services because they fear any interaction with Prince George's County animal services will result in their pet being euthanized. As we experienced at our organization, this ban creates barriers in accessing services and creates lack of trust in the community for the animal welfare agency. As a result, critical needs that the agency is there to fulfill are unknown and go unmet.

The purpose of breed specific legislation is to prohibit or restrict the ownership of certain breeds of dogs which have been arbitrarily defined as "dangerous." An obvious flaw with breed-based selection is that it is tremendously difficult to determine a dog's breed. Prince George's County relies on appearance alone, which is both arbitrary and inaccurate. In fact, most dogs who come into our shelter are mixed breed dogs. A recent study asked 16 animal shelter workers to guess the breed of 120 dogs. While the shelter staff collectively identified 52% of the dogs as pit bull-type dogs, DNA tests proved that only 21% had any pit bull mix in them.

Furthermore, there are a number of published studies that consistently show that breed has no effect on a dog's propensity to bite. Instead these studies conclude that the predictive factors of whether a dog is dangerous or potentially dangerous include whether the dog is socialized, altered and receiving veterinary care. Experts like the American Veterinary Medical Association

and the National Animal Control Association agree that no breed of dog is inherently dangerous and reject policies based solely on breed

Prince George's County can use this opportunity to embrace progressive policies that create safe communities for people and pets by updating their animal control ordinance to include restrictions on chaining of dogs and leaving dogs outdoors, providing access to low cost veterinary care, including spay and neuter services, and replacing the breed specific language with a breed-neutral approach that focuses on the behavior of the individual dog and owner.

The tide is shifting and every year more communities abandon these discriminatory and ineffective laws and adopt language that works. All of Prince George's County's neighbors including D.C., Fairfax County, Alexandria, Arlington, Montgomery County, and Ann Arundel County have repealed breed specific legislation and we are hopeful this is the year that Prince George's County will do the same.

HRA has had a long and productive relationship with Chief Taylor and Prince George's County Animal Services. We have worked side by side on a number of cruelty investigations and we look forward to working together in furtherance of our shared goals of making Prince George's County and the national capital region safe and humane for people and their pets.