



June 6, 2022

Delivered via email to dickb@detroitmi.gov

Dear Mr. Dick:

After repeated failed attempts to communicate with City of Detroit administrators, we are writing to make one last offer of assistance to benefit the citizens and animals of Detroit before we take alternative actions.

The Michigan Pet Alliance (MPA) is an association of shelters and rescues designed to improve the welfare of homeless and abused animals by promoting best practices and advocating for better policies protecting companion animals.

We (as MPA and formerly as MPFA) and our members have been deeply involved with Detroit Animal Care and Control (DACC) over the last 15 years to address serious allegations around excessive killing and the inhumane care of animals. Not only have we provided support, guidance and resources, our members have taken in and saved countless animals from DACC. Some of these members include Humane Society of Macomb, Humane Society of Huron Valley, Paws for Life Rescue, Upper Peninsula Animal Welfare Shelter and Charlevoix Area Humane Society.

Last spring, MPA's concerns for DACC and its operations were renewed when multiple news stories and personal accounts told of poor animal care, outdated practices and the continuing crisis caused by a dilapidated facility much too small for its purposes.

To better understand the current challenges, we visited the facility, met with the director, and spoke with others on staff and in the administration. We heard many stories from employees, volunteers, transfer partners and constituents regarding acute operational issues and chronic facility problems.

In response, we offered our professional assistance and guidance multiple times. This ranged from suggestions on operational changes aimed at reducing the burden on employees and facilities to expert guidance on facility design to ensure the community's needs would be met in a safe, effective and humane way. Unfortunately, these offers have fallen on deaf ears.

At the request of Detroit's communications director, one of our board members took part in a promotional press story talking about the lifesaving work offered by DACC through its rescue

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partnerships. Also, in response to a direct request from the city, our CEO stood on stage with Mayor Duggan as he announced plans to build a new shelter.

In both cases, our involvement was wholly contingent upon substantive inclusion in conversations around operational improvements and facility planning, with one goal: to help the City of Detroit better meet its animal care and control obligations, humanely.

However, all subsequent attempts to communicate with the administration have gone unanswered and we remain deeply concerned by the information we continue to receive.

Even though promises around the groundbreaking of a new shelter seem empty, serious issues belie the vaguest of plans. These issues include the stated plan to refurbish an old city incinerator into a new animal shelter, a preposterously insufficient construction budget, and a building design seemingly bereft of humane sheltering and animal care expertise.

Meanwhile, regular and desperate pleas continue from DACC for rescue partners to prevent killing for space. Not for a handful of animals, but dozens every week. While Michigan's rescues and shelters work hard to support each other, these constant last-minute attempts at lifesaving are not a long-term sustainable solution.

Although no organization is perfect, we also continue to hear firsthand accounts from heartbroken employees burned out by organizational dysfunction, constrained only by bad choices, and working in inadequate and unsafe facilities.

Effective animal control requires a community-wide strategy that includes public education and outreach. Crucially, DACC must work with the community on bite prevention strategies and various aspects of responsible pet ownership.

No matter how many animals Detroit catches and kills, the residents remain at greater risk when there is not a well-coordinated, adequately funded and inclusive community-wide strategy.

It has been well proven in communities across the country that for every animal killed, another will simply take its place. Prevention strategies, community education and collaboration, well-managed operations, implementation of best practices, well-trained and fairly paid employees, and healthy facilities are all needed to make real change.

While risks of animal homelessness and cruelty increase in economically distressed communities, Detroit pet owners are no different than those anywhere else. Most think of their pets as family and rely on them for love and companionship.

Like pet owners everywhere, when an animal goes missing, they are beside themselves. When they have to give up a pet due to personal hardship, they grieve. When a neighborhood pet is being neglected, they worry and call for help.

As such, they want the lost, homeless and abused to be sheltered safely and humanely. For those animals that can't go back home, Detroiters want them to be given every reasonable chance to find a new home.

Of its \$2 billion budget, there is only one government service in the City of Detroit aimed at helping pets and the people who love them, Detroit Animal Care and Control, representing .16% of the budget. When the budgeted expense is compared to the number of community complaints received about animals, it is easy to see that the outlay doesn't match the need.

Among its urban peers, DACC is one of the worst in the nation. This is not because Detroiters don't care. They do. Nearly two decades ago, Detroit residents passed a millage to fund the construction of a badly needed new shelter. Unfortunately, those funds and plans seemed to vanish into thin air.

Even so, several years ago, a talented director was able to improve care, reduce intake and euthanasia, and draft needed laws on outdoor and dangerous dogs. But today, DACC has had five directors in as many years and still resides in a small, dilapidated, 100+-year-old, dangerous, asbestos-filled building. The walls and floors are crumbling and can't be sanitized. It has poor air circulation and dangerously cramped spaces. Overcrowding, stress and sickness are the standard.

The current facility is not just a health hazard for animals, but also for the people who work and volunteer there. Last summer, the ceiling collapsed in the staff break room. A few weeks later, the cat room ceiling did the same.

Media stories covering lack of space and sick animals denied medical treatment don't reflect the whole picture. As such, they point to quick fixes and easy scapegoats.

And that was precisely what followed. Instead of transparent communication on operational changes, progress on plans to build a new shelter or even just some honesty on the challenges and commitment to improvement, kill orders were put in place for animals there longer than a week or two.

Mandated by city administrators, this order stated that the animals had to go "by any means necessary."

This left already embattled staff and volunteers with the task of frantically trying to get animals out alive. With herculean effort and the help of many Michigan rescues, shelters and adopters, they mostly succeeded for a while. But now, healthy animals are being routinely put to death.

Kill orders aren't real solutions. Not only do they cause needless death, but they are also soul-crushing for the dedicated women and men taking care of those animals. Kill orders are also a form of emotional blackmail that can make a community more unsafe. Panic-stricken groups end up intaking dogs and cats without any evaluation, then adopters take home animals they may not be prepared to care for responsibly. People get hurt. Animals get hurt. Meanwhile, DACC's current policies and procedures perpetuate the cycle.

DACC issues are not the fault of employees or any one individual. Good leaders are crucial, but no one person will make the difference at DACC -- at least not for long. And, DACC employees are some of the hardest working and passionate people in the industry.

These are systemic problems. For instance, in addition to a crumbling shelter, management is saddled by byzantine bureaucratic rules. It took over five years just to secure a contract for food supply to ensure the animals consistently have food to eat. Low wages, poor working conditions and an environment of constant high stress cripple the recruitment and retention of qualified employees. In turn, the safety of animals and citizens is put at greater risk.

This isn't a battle between meeting animal needs vs. human needs. This is a social justice issue. Effective animal services must take a One Health approach to strengthen the fabric of the community.

The neglect of DACC hurts animals, people and the community as a whole. The resources exist to do better and the treatment of homeless animals cannot be separated from the treatment of residents. These are people's pets, their family members. DACC employees are also people who deserve safe and healthy working conditions, decent wages and humane policies.

Detroiters deserve better. City leaders need to address the real problems at DACC and ensure sound policies, practices and facilities that keep the city safe and better protect animals and the people who love them.

Draconian kill orders, adopting out dogs just to be chained in the yard and a promise to one day turn an old city incinerator into a new animal shelter aren't real solutions.

As Michigan's statewide association made up of leading animal welfare experts, the Michigan Pet Alliance stands ready to partner with the City of Detroit to make real and lasting change.

We look forward to your response during the month of June.

Sincerely,



Joseph Dobesh
President & CEO
Michigan Pet Alliance

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