



Senatorial Statement

by

**The Senator Lindsay Simmons-Wilson, JP
Junior Minister of Home Affairs**

Thursday 21st March, 2024

Measures to address the care and management of dogs

Madame President, I rise today to inform this Honourable body of the Ministry of Home Affairs' concerns and considerations pertaining to dogs in our community.

Madame President, dogs are very much part of our community, and for a vast majority of dog owners on Island, they treat their dogs like a friend or family member. Dogs can offer companionship, provide comfort and emotional support, and compensate for a person's physical disability. There is potential for dogs to play a role in promoting healing and wellness in hospitals and rest homes, and contribute to rehabilitation of offenders. I recently learned how dogs are being used in an overseas

library to help children learn to read. Dogs play several wonderful and meaningful roles in our community.

However, in Bermuda, the Animal Control Section within the Department of Environment and Natural Resources rarely gets to see dogs in these positive roles. Sadly, instead Animal Control must focus on the daily complaints, and grapple with the worrisome trends evident in its data. Over the period 2021-2023, the Department has recorded the following:

- a doubling in the number of complaints which resulted in the collection of one or more animals;
- a tripling in the number of live animals collected;
- near doubling of the percentage of animals euthanatized;
- a doubling in the number of reported incidents involving biting or injury to a person
- a more than doubling in the number of reported incidents involving biting or injury to an animal
- a tripling of complaints of chasing or threatening behaviour.

These data points result from a significant rise in the number of unlicensed, unsocialized dogs, a very high percentage of which are of the American pitbull breed and pitbull-type dogs. **Madame President**, you will recall that, in 2018, this Government responded to calls to ease prior restrictions on this breed. We gave the community that which it asked for,

and now the time has come to ask whether this community has collectively demonstrated that we are responsible enough to maintain this breed.

Madame President, when I consider the rising incidence of biting and injury, I think of the people and beloved pets that have fallen victim to dogs being out of control. Some of these people are vulnerable senior citizens and children. I think of the wounds and mutilations; the horrible fear these victims must have endured; the anguish, and psychological scars that may remain long after the physical wounds have healed.

Madame President, I shudder to think that of the more horrific outcomes that could have occurred. We aim to minimize the likelihood of such occurring. The Ministry of Home Affairs accepts that animal control involves public health and domestic security. Hence, this Ministry's willingness to partner with other Ministries and external partners to create a safer community.

Madame President, in response to the complaints received by Animal Control, the Minister of Home Affairs reconvened the *Adhoc Canine Advisory Committee*. **Chaired by myself**, the Committee incorporates many of the stakeholders best placed to consider the issues involving dogs in the community and help formulate recommendations to address them. These stakeholders represent the SPCA, the Bermuda Kennel Club, various dog trainers and a private veterinary practitioner. We are thankful for their participation. Although final recommendations have not been

ratified, I feel it important to share key recommendations that have emerged thus far.

Firstly, **Madame President**, is the matter of public education. We have found that many dog owners are simply ignorant of their legal and social responsibilities. Through the Department of Communications and Information, the first of our public education campaign has begun, with radio and social medial advertising, including *Facebook, Twitter and Instagram*. In the near future we will be reaching out to the public with episodes of *This week in Government* which will air on *CITV, YouTube and Government Social Media*. We will partner with local canine interest groups to strengthen public education about dog ownership, canine care, socialization and breeding. We need to create a different and new environment, and change public perception and attitudes. We need an environment in which receivers of puppies demand better breeding and care by breeders; and breeders demand better of new owners; and that the needs of the animals are met.

This increased education will lead to more responsible breeding, more responsible ownership, safer, well-adjusted dogs and a safer community.

Madame President, the idea of an amnesty has been raised. There are options to waive fees, forego formal prosecutions, mandate spaying/neutering of illegal dogs, without exception and by a pre-determined deadline. **Madame President**, while I speak of an amnesty,

allow me to be very clear: An amnesty will not be a ‘get out of jail free card’ for wrongful, irresponsible or illegal activity; and an amnesty will not be a blind acceptance of keeping conditions that continue to fuel these disturbing trends. Any amnesty will be for a limited period of time, after which strong enforcement will follow.

Speaking of enforcement, **Madame President**, the Ministry of Home Affairs recognizes and appreciates the vital work of the Animal Control team. This small team of four officers provide a twenty four seven (24/7) service to the community. They are often called upon to work alongside members of the Bermuda Police Service, and thus animal wardens must be considered first-responders. Thus the Ministry of Home Affairs supports a review of the Animal Control Section to help ensure that it is appropriately resourced in terms of personnel, finances and equipment enabling it to safely continue to play its vital role in the community.

Towards that end, **Madame President**, I am pleased to announce that the entire Animal Control team recently received forty (40) hours of Animal Control Officer (ACO) training from the U.S. based **Animal Control and Care Academy**. The two instructors together taught from a foundation of decades of law enforcement and animal shelter experience, and formal certifications. Our wardens successfully received formal training in essential aspects of basic and advanced ACO training. They demonstrated competency in safe animal handling, lifting and loading, appropriate use

of equipment to ensure the safety of themselves and the animals, thermometry training, animal attack investigations, and euthanasia. Wardens were exposed to the strong link between animal offences and drug offences, between animal cruelty and domestic violence. Yes, **Madame President**, in the course of their duties, animal wardens do come across sites of drug offences. They also do have a role in identifying and protecting victims of child, spousal and elder abuse. Hence, a representative of the **Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors** participated in this aspect of the warden training, as it highlight the interdepartmental cooperative approach required to address incidence of domestic violence. We are happy we could make this training available to our local wardens, and build the relationship between helping agencies.

Madame President, I have digressed to acknowledge this important success. Please allow me to continue.

Madame President, the Ministry is cognizant of the amount of time required to bring cases to court. To address the lengthy judicial process and the prolonged holding of animals that results, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources will consult with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Senior Magistrate to hasten the judicial process. While we fully respect the legal rights of any defendant, the judicial process must be conducted in timely fashion that minimizes the incarceration of a dog. Prolonged holding of an animal may lead to

unwarranted psychological stress upon the animal. Resultantly, the dog may engage in self-harm, and become increasingly difficult to handle and more dangerous to wardens as time goes on. We seek to prevent these effects upon animals in custody by moving the judicial process expeditiously.

Madame President, other considerations include bringing a halt to all breeding of dogs, or to limit importation to only spayed/neutered dogs.

Madame President, the Dogs Act 2008 remains under constant review. Based upon advice from the Attorney General's Chambers and experiences of wardens, we are considering amendments to the Dogs Act 2008 to help ensure better control of dogs.

Madame President, we are actively working on solutions to alleviate the problem issues seen with dogs. The complex issues surrounding dogs have persisted for decades, and we are moving collaboratively forward to address them. The primary goal is to have our canine companions be happy and civil members of our community.

Madame President, in the coming months I look forward to reporting on our progress on these very important initiatives.

Thank you, **Madame President**.