



NEW YORK  
CITY BAR

**REPORT ON LEGISLATION**

**A. 1839  
S. 3167**

**M. of A. Lentol  
Senator Diaz**

AN ACT to amend the elder law, in relation to providing companion pets for seniors.

**THIS BILL IS APPROVED**

This Committee would like to express its enthusiastic support for this bill, which, to the extent appropriations are available, authorizes the Director of the Office of the Aging to establish Senior Pet Companionship Programs in order to match seniors who have limited social contact with companion animals. These programs may be established in conjunction with other public or private agencies engaged in the care of animals.

Numerous studies show that pets are tremendously important for the health and well-being of the aging. For example, a study of 100 Medicare patients showed that seniors who live with dogs go to the doctor less frequently than those who do not, and that even the most highly stressed dog guardians in the study had 21% fewer physicians' contacts than non dog-guardians (Siegel, 1990). Pet guardians in general have been shown to have lower blood pressure, lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (Anderson, 1992), fewer minor health problems (Serpell, 1991) and higher one-year survival rates following coronary artery disease (Friedman, 1980). Dog guardians express less fear of being a crime victim, both on the street when with their dog and in their homes (Serpell, 1991).

The establishment of Senior Pet Companionship Programs could be extremely beneficial in helping seniors who might not otherwise be able establish a relationship with an animal. Taking a new animal into the home can be a daunting and intimidating task. Such a program could help seniors obtain access to appropriate animals, select an animal who will not require more care than the individual is capable of, obtain education

regarding the appropriate care of the animal, and obtain accurate information about and negotiate any potential issues regarding lease restrictions on animals

In particular, because such programs may be established in conjunction with animal care agencies, the programs could be extremely helpful by potentially providing an ongoing oversight and support system linked to foster and adoptive homes that will allow the individual to know that the animal will be cared for if the individual is temporarily, or permanently, no longer able to do so because of illness or death. This would allow caring individuals, who would otherwise be reluctant to assume responsibility for a pet whose life expectancy may well exceed their own, to know that any health problems that they might have will not result in the death or abandonment of an animal whom they have taken into their home and come to love. This is one of the most intimidating aspects of pet adoption for frail seniors.

In addition to facilitating the many benefits experienced by people who live with animals, this legislation could be very beneficial to animals as well by helping to increase the number of adoptive homes available to animals in New York State's animal shelters, which kill tens of thousands of dogs and cats each year because they have no homes. In particular, it would tend to increase the number of homes available to cats, whose quiet ways can be particularly beneficial for companionship with less active seniors and who are killed in shelters in much higher numbers than dogs.

This committee takes note of the fact that the legislation does not spell out the specific roles of the Senior Pet Companionship Programs, nor provide any funding for them. There is, as a result, the risk that the programs it creates will not result in the potential benefits set forth herein. However, we nevertheless feel that the legislation's potential to be beneficial is enormous and that merely by creating the possibility of such programs this legislation takes an important step toward creating an environment in which those seniors who can most benefit from the companionship of an animal will be able to do so in a way that protects both them and the animals they come to care for.

## **REFERENCES**

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Serpell, J.A. (1991), "Beneficial effects of pet ownership on some aspects of human health and behaviour," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84, 717-720.

Siegel, J.M.(1990). "Stressful life events and use of physician services among the elderly: The moderating role of pet ownership," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58 (6), 1081-1086.