Dear

Georgia has an overpopulation of homeless pets that is costing its taxpayers millions of dollars, allowing thousands of dogs and cats to needlessly suffer neglect and abandonment and or to be killed for shelter space. At any given time, Georgia has over 100,000 homeless dogs filling inadequate shelters in spite of Georgia’s non-profit rescues transporting tens of thousands annually to other states to find homes. I am writing you to make you aware of the overpopulation problem and its effects in the hopes that you will address it at the state level by supporting or sponsoring bills that offer simple solutions.

It is a widely held misconception that the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA) is responsible for monitoring and controlling Georgia's companion animal population, when in fact, population control is not the GDA's responsibility. Controlling companion animal populations is the sole responsibility of Georgia's state and local governments. The GDA's only authority is over its licensed animal businesses (shelters, dealers, kennels, etc.). Even there, they have no law enforcement powers, only civil penalty powers. (Another needed change.)

Georgia's homeless dog overpopulation is relatively easy to fix by making changes that encourage spay/neuter and discourage accidental litters and illegal breeding. Your engagement in the solutions to this problem as a legislator would be appreciated by the thousands of Georgians who volunteer their time, effort, and money to try to combat this problem. They carry a heavy burden for ALL Georgians because for years nonprofit groups, volunteers and donors have been absorbing 80% of Georgia's dog overpopulation with no help or support from state government and they need relief from decisionmakers like you. Without them, Georgia would have stray dogs running in the streets like a third world country.

GEORGIA IS RANKED #47 out of 50 states on companion animal welfare. This is unacceptable, embarrassing and completely preventable.

Georgia’s overpopulation of homeless pets is evidenced by:

* Municipal shelters are always full or overfull, with dogs tied to poles or fences or ACOs keeping dogs in their trucks. Municipal shelters euthanize dogs for space daily across the state of Georgia, at a rate of approximately 25k annually. Tens of thousands of Georgia's homeless dogs are being transported out of Georgia by rescues to other states annually.
* Municipal animal control/services budgets are being increased every year even in jurisdictions with decreasing human populations. This takes tax dollars away from those communities' budgets for education, law enforcement and roads and are instead being used for housing homeless animals, their food, euthanasia, medical care, staffing, overhead and transportation.
* Shelter intakes for dogs only (those surrendered by owners, impounded by Animal Control, abandoned on the street, or lost/stray dogs that have been picked up) that we can track is approximately 125,000 a year and is either static or has increased over the last three years, in spite of all the non-profit resources thrown at the problem, proof that Georgia cannot “adopt its way out of the problem.”
* Georgia's nonprofit rescues (organizations such as Atlanta Humane and locally, No Kill Glynn County, that pull dogs from municipal shelters, vet them, spay/neuter them and get them adopted) currently absorb almost 80% of Georgia's homeless dog population. This number continues to grow and is unsustainable, expensive for taxpayers and fraught with risk. Georgia has anywhere from 600-700 non-profit organizations whose only purpose is to address homeless animal populations. The number of licensed dog rescues now rivals the number of pet dealers (breeders) licensed by the GDA. The money these nonprofits use to save animals from euthanasia comes from individual Georgia taxpayers. The hundreds of hours volunteers spend on re-homing these dogs and caring for them is hundreds of hours these Georgia residents do not get paid for and don't take home as income taxable by the state of Georgia. It is causing tax revenue losses to Georgia because these nonprofits do not pay any state or federal taxes on donations AND the donors get tax deductible charitable deductions for those donations. Put another way, Georgia's taxpayers are currently paying for the cost of this homeless dog overpopulation with tax exempt dollars instead of after-tax dollars because the state of Georgia has not invested any General Funds in eliminating this overpopulation. It would be much cheaper for Georgia to fix this overpopulation problem these ways that rely on after-tax dollars instead of using pre-tax dollars like it is now.

The following information is organized as follows:

1. THE CAUSES OF GEORGIA'S DOG OVERPOPULATION
2. THE SOLUTIONS TO GEORGIA’S DOG OVERPOPULATION

**Part 1. THE CAUSES OF GEORGIA’S DOG OVERPOPULATION**

1. **Breeders not licensed but operating legally under the GDA's de minimis exception rule** (maximum one litter per year or 30 adult dogs),
2. **Breeders not licensed by the GDA operating illegally** ("backyard breeders"),
3. **"Accidental litters"** or unintentional breeding - puppies produced by dogs not spayed or neutered whose owners didn't plan to have puppies. This is generally due to lack of knowledge or lack of resources or access to spay/neuter surgery for their dog.

**Part 2. THE SOLUTIONS TO GEORGIA’S DOG OVERPOPULATION**

**A.** **Breeders not licensed but operating legally under the GDA's de minimis exception rule:**

SOLUTIONS:

1. **The state of Georgia REMOVES the de minimis exception to the GDA's breeder regulations**, so that every dog breeder must be licensed to breed legally. Currently, individuals can legally sell one litter of puppies or sell 30 adult dogs annually. The problem with the current rule is that it is simply unenforceable.
2. Since this will increase enforcement costs, the associated GDA license fee could be increased to 2.7% of gross revenue or $5 per dog or any amount sufficient to cover the department’s annual licensing expenses. (Currently the breeder fees are capped at $400 per year for any number of dogs over 80 dogs which is ridiculously low and is not auditable). That small change would bring in 3 times the amount of revenue to the GDA that it could use to be fully staffed and have sufficient resources to fulfill its mission. Local jurisdictions would enforce the state law and could budget for that enforcement through fees on pet registrations and control identification of animals through mandatory micro chipping. They can also require mandatory spay/neuter of non-AKC registered dogs. (We have several local jurisdictions already doing this). The number of dogs that will be added to Georgia's overpopulation under the GDA de minimis exception over the next 7 years can be estimated as follows:



**B. Breeders not licensed by the GDA operating illegally ("backyard breeders")**

SOLUTIONS:

1. Removing the de minimis exception above will allow local animal control officers (ACOs) as well as local law enforcement to pursue individuals who are breeding illegally whether on site or online. Local municipalities/governments can self-fund their enforcement budgets animal control departments using registration fees. Closing down or licensing local breeders under the GDA de minimis exception could bring in sufficient revenues to cover a temporary increase in costs.
2. Making outdoor retail sales of pets illegal will help discourage illegal breeding. (Several local jurisdictions already have this).

**C. "ACCIDENTAL LITTERS" (unintentional breeding):**

SOLUTIONS:

1. **Make it mandatory that municipal shelters spay or neuter adopted pets PRIOR to going to the adopter**. The current Georgia state law requires only that shelters have adopters "promise”' to spay/neuter their adopted pets within 30 days. This is unenforceable because shelters do not have the resources or time to follow up on each animal to verify that is was fixed. If we changed this rule so that all adopted pets MUST be spayed/neutered PRIOR to leaving the shelter it would prevent illegal breeders from shopping for males or females to breed with from our shelters. Some counties have done this even WITHOUT having local veterinary services available by transporting dogs or bringing mobile vets in to do the surgeries on a weekly or monthly basis, utilizing grants and discounts.
2. **Require pet shops that sell puppies from puppy mills to only source from animal shelters and rescues**. Many states have already done this, and a handful of Georgia’s local jurisdictions have as well.
3. Increase access and lower costs of spay/neuter surgery in Georgia’s rural and low-income communities by making sure grants from Georgia’s statewide Sterilization Fund are directed to only low-income communities that do not have direct access to veterinary care for spay/neuter services.
4. GDA should monitor homeless animal populations to pinpoint areas in need. Currently the state doesn't collect shelter statistics such as euthanizations and intake numbers. The state of Georgia cannot very well fix a problem that it can't identify and measure. A statewide database of shelter statistics is absolutely necessary. It could be used to determine what works and what doesn't to control populations, identify problems and successes, keep decisionmakers informed, encourage transparency, encourage community engagement and encourage best practices for animal control and sheltering across the state. The online database could also include a "Do Not Adopt" list of animal flippers, abuse conviction stats and other information useful to local communities and law enforcement. Online databases of shelter statistics already exist on platforms owned by mon-profits such as "Shelter Animals County" and "Spot Society”)

An unfortunate result of Georgia’s current pet overpopulation is that cruelty, neglect and abandonment of pet animals here is rampant. As the supply of dogs continues to grow and the demand for dogs stays static, the value of each dog’s life decreases. As the value of each life decreases, instances of owner neglect, owner surrender and abandonment and unnecessary euthanization deaths increase.

SOLUTIONS:

1. **Increase training of Georgia’s law enforcement and ACOs on state animal law and “The Link”**. Local law enforcement in Georgia’s counties and cities is very often not enforcing Georgia’s animal laws because it is not required for POST certification and because of lack of training in that area of the law as well as a lack of training in how important it is. The twenty years' worth evidentiary research study supporting the link between violence against humans to violence against animals and as a precursor to other violent criminal acts, such as school shootings, should be an integral part of that training. The FBI, DOJ and National Sheriffs Association have recognized the importance of identifying animal abuse and cross reporting of its occurrence. It has been proven that where there are animal related laws broken, there are other laws being broken and where there is animal abuse in a home there is usually other abuse whether domestic, elder or child. How a community treats its defenseless – whether its elderly, poor, disabled or children – is directly related to the health, safety and education of that community. Even lawmakers with no regard for animals should care about law enforcement training on this subject matter because of its ability to prevent or identify violence against humans. (See the National Link Coalition and their free educational materials). Lack of awareness of local law enforcement of state animal law has caused the disasters you have seen on the news the last two years, where hundreds of dogs have suffered for years, with residents complaining for years and by the time the dogs are seized it costs thousands of dollars to clean it up and has cost much suffering and unnecessary deaths of the dogs themselves. All of those situations could have been prevented entirely if local law enforcement had investigated, charged and shut down those businesses. Two recent cases in 2019, the 500 German Shepherds in Metter/Candler/Montgomery and the 700 small dogs in Nashville/Berrien County were the direct result of inaction on the part of law enforcement and lack of communication between the GDA and local law enforcement. Georgia state law regarding the protection of companion animals under Title 4 and Title 16-12-4 is no less important than all other Georgia state law and that fact needs to be communicated to local governments. Georgia's State Attorney General and/or Department of Justice should issue a Statement of Position that states that Title 4 and Title 16-12-4 must be enforced, carry no less weight nor are less important to enforce than all other State statutes.
2. **Encourage or require that the FBI NIBRS database is utilized** by each jurisdiction in Georgia to include animal related incidents. Our understanding is that Georgia has not become NIBRS compliant and in jurisdictions where law enforcement is installing NIBRS, they are not including animal related incidents.
3. **Encourage Humane Education in communities and schools**. A handful of Georgia’s local jurisdictions are already doing this after realizing that that is the only long-term fix.
4. **Georgia could require that each municipality with a human population of over 15,000 must have an animal shelter facility**. Georgia has over 20 counties without an Animal Control facility. Many states, including Alabama, require that counties with populations over 5,000 people must have an animal shelter.

In closing, we want to see improvement in the lives of Georgia's companion animals and hope we can consider you an ally in this fight for those improvements

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I am hoping you will help make a difference. We can do so much better. Please let me know if you have any questions or need additional information.