



## **Ministerial Statement**

**By**

**The Hon. Walter Roban, JP, MP**

**Minister of Home Affairs**

**Monday, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2023**

### **Measures to address the care and management of dogs**

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**Mr. Speaker,** I rise today to inform this Honourable House of the Ministry of Home Affairs' concerns and strategy to better manage dogs.

**Mr. Speaker,** as you are aware, dogs are very much part of our community. I am reminded of the saying "Dogs are a man's best friend," and I hear people describe their dogs as members of their family; "My dog is like my child" they say. Well, **Mr. Speaker,** for a vast majority of dog owners on Island, they treat their dogs like a friend or family member, and their dogs are peaceful members of the community. However for a significant minority of owners, their stories are very much different. For these dog owners, their dogs are constrained to the

end of a chain or limited to the confines of a kennel. Interaction is minimal. Training is minimal. Socialization is minimal. Care is minimal. To these owners, I ask, ‘*Why do you have a dog?*’ It is mostly this set of owners and dogs that are responsible for the stream of unprovoked dog attacks on Island.

**Mr. Speaker**, data held by Animal Control points to a trend in our community of dogs being out of control. Of the years 2019-2022, calls to assist Police, complaints of biting/injury to a person and chasing/threatening behaviour, were highest during 2022.

**Mr. Speaker**, you may recall news reports regarding multiple dog attacks that occurred on Friday, January 13<sup>th</sup> of this year. From the perspective of animal control, that day was a dark day for Bermuda. **Mr. Speaker**, I think of the senior citizens, the children, and the animals that fell victim that day to dogs being out of control. I think of the bites to heads, face and legs. I shudder to think of the horrible fear these victims must have endured; the anguish, and psychological scars that may remain long after the physical wounds have healed. I shudder to think that of the more horrific outcomes that could have occurred.

Friday, January 13<sup>th</sup> was an unusual day in the number of attacks that occurred, but sadly, dog attacks have become a common occurrence. They are a threat to public health & sense of security.

**Mr. Speaker**, people are afraid, and this is a problem. There is real anxiety in the community, where members of the public are scared to walk with their dogs, or to enjoy the railway trail or even their own yards. Complainants tell of being trapped in their cars or their homes for fear of an attack by an uncontrolled dog. **Mr. Speaker**, not all loose dogs pose a real danger, but the fear these callers experience is absolutely real.

**Mr. Speaker**, the vast majority of dog interactions are friendly, positive, playful and peaceful. We should not lose sight of that, while our attention is drawn to the interactions with mismanaged, poorly trained or untrained dogs who are causing pain, fear and anxiety. Our challenge is towards those owners in the community who are **not** doing the right things for their community, and for their dogs.

**Mr. Speaker**, we believe that these negative incidents are rooted in a number of contributing factors that will be dealt with, in collaboration with partner organizations.

First, there has been a significant rise in the number of unlicensed, unsocialized dogs, a very high percentage of which are of the American pitbull breed. **Mr. Speaker**, 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 demonstrated that we collectively are responsible enough to maintain this breed.

The large number of illegal dogs is likely also a result of owners who are unaware of their legislated responsibilities or simply have no regard for the Dogs Act 2008. Perhaps there is a perception that enforcement is weak, and owners will only do what is necessary **if caught**.

There is also a certain callousness towards a biting/attack incident, with a simple dismissal: ‘That’s what dogs do’.

For some people, breeding represents an opportunity for income. Unlicensed breeding has run amuck, with little forethought to future homes, the wellbeing of the animal or the wellbeing of the community. The animals are distributed to anyone in exchange for a few dollars, or less. A certain breed has become a cheap commodity for profit and opportunity. There is no real sensitivity, love or care involved. People acquire a certain breed as easily going to the store, buying a loaf of bread. If it goes bad, they just throw it away and spend a few dollars to get another. This is abuse, plain and simple. We should not tolerate this type of environment, and these are people who should **not** be allowed to care for or possess a dog.

There are people among us that do not believe in spaying or neutering, that believe that every pregnant dog should birth her litter with no thought about where the puppies will go or who will care for them. There is an expectation that the Dog Wardens or the SPCA will find new homes for the animals; and a belief held by some that they can: *“Let someone else deal with the problems that they produced”*.

These factors have led to a plethora of dogs on Island, and a large number of dogs being abandoned: unclaimed, tied to posts, left at the gate of the SPCA. Our kennels are full, the SPCA's kennels are full, foster homes are limited, but the stream of dogs in need continues strong.

**Mr. Speaker,** This is not right. This laissez-faire attitude must change; likewise the attitude of certain owners that they do not have to proactively train and socialize their pets.

We need to create a different and new environment, 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; that the needs of the animals are met, such that they become well-adjusted to society.

**Mr. Speaker,** We recognize the need for active support of the community in addressing these issues so that any solution that affects the community will be successful.

Wide-spread advertising, harsher penalties, more efficient judicial processes are the easy steps available. However, more steps will be necessary to bring about that needed mind shift in dog owners.

Hence, **Mr. Speaker,** I am happy to announce that I have already called for a reconvening of an Adhoc Canine Committee, which will be comprised of persons in the fields of animal welfare, behaviour and

training. They will be asked to examine the current dog situation in Bermuda and provide their recommendations to me.

**Mr. Speaker,** I also reaffirm my support of those on the front lines of this problem, the Animal Control Officers and the SPCA officers. We are moving to ensure full staffing of animal control officers, with the equipment and training they require. We will augment our support of the SPCA to supplement their programmes to improve animal welfare in Bermuda.

**Mr. Speaker,** my Ministry is committed to broader advertising to ensure owners know what is required of them.

In addition, regulations are complete to implement ticketing for minor offenses. This will allow the animal control section to deal with minor offences more expeditiously and allow the team to concentrate their efforts on more serious matters.

**Mr. Speaker,** the Ministry of Home Affairs has increased direct support to the SPCA from ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) to thirty thousand dollars (\$30,000) to assist with the delivery of their programs.

The Ministry of Home Affairs has made significant progress with an online system for the renewal of dog licences. This will make renewal of dog licences far easier and convenient for the dog owner and relieves some of the administrative burden for the Department.

In the same vein, we have initiated an on-line complaints system and will be enhancing that system to better manage the number and location of complaints.

**Mr. Speaker,** based upon advice from the Attorney General's Chambers, we will be considering amendments to the Dogs Act 2008 to help ensure better control of dogs.

**Mr. Speaker,** we are actively working on solutions to alleviate some of these issues. We recognize that we need to think outside the box and bring to bear many tools to solve these problems. The complex issues surrounding dogs have persisted for decades for many Governments, 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.

**Mr. Speaker,** in the coming months I look forward to reporting on our progress on these very important initiatives.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker.**