



Matt Bershadker

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Matthew Bershadker has held his current position since June 2013. A lifelong animal lover, he joined the nation's first animal welfare organization in 2001, serving most recently as Senior Vice President of the ASPCA Anti-Cruelty Group, the division responsible for programs that confront animal cruelty and suffering across the country. While serving in this role, Bershadker launched the organization's Field Investigations & Response team to provide skilled support during large-scale puppy mill seizures, dog fighting raids, animal boarding cases and natural disasters. Bershadker also oversaw the development of the ASPCA's Cruelty Intervention Advocacy program, an initiative to help protect companion animals in danger of potential abuse or neglect by addressing the root causes of animal cruelty and helping establish sustainable assistance. During his tenure, the ASPCA announced a multi-year, \$25 million commitment to save the lives of animals in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. Before joining the ASPCA, Bershadker worked for organizations including Share Our Strength (SOS) and the Rape Abuse Incest National Network (RAINN). He is also a Board Member of the Gruber Family Foundation and Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries. He received his M.B.A. from Johns Hopkins University's Carey Business School and a B.A. in communications from Ohio University.*

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals® (aspc.org) was the first humane society to be established in North America and is, today, one of the largest in the world. The organization was founded on the belief that animals are entitled to kind and respectful treatment at the hands of humans and must be protected under the law. Headquartered in New York City, the ASPCA maintains a strong local presence and is also recognized as a national animal welfare organization with programs that extend its anti-cruelty mission across the country. The ASPCA is a privately funded 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, and has more than 2 million supporters*

# The Story of the ASPCA

An Interview with Matt Bershadker,  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)

*across the country. The ASPCA's mission, as stated by founder Henry Bergh in 1866, is "to provide effective means for the prevention of cruelty to animals throughout the United States."*

## Will you highlight the history and heritage of the ASPCA?

The history of the ASPCA goes back more than 150 years, which is remarkable longevity for any nonprofit, and I believe it speaks to the commitment and vision we apply to our mission. In 1863, while on assignment in Russia as an American diplomat, New Yorker Henry Bergh stopped a carriage driver from beating his fallen horse. There and then, Bergh realized his true personal mission and left his post to create the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866.

When it was founded, the ASPCA was the first and only humane society in the Western Hemisphere, and its formation prompted the New York State Legislature to pass the country's first effective anti-cruelty law, the first of many ASPCA breakthroughs and milestones for animals in need.

By the mid-2000s, the ASPCA had become a visible and active presence at scenes of natural disasters, dogfighting and puppy mill raids, and cases of severe neglect. We've deployed animal rescue staff and granted tens of millions of dollars in response to emergencies including Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria and the devastating California wildfires of 2018. In these disaster cases and many others, we performed land and water rescues, established emergency animal shelters, and helped reunite displaced pets with their owners.

In 2014, we established a groundbreaking citywide partnership with the New York City Police Department which increased the number of animal cruelty arrests in New York City by more than 200 percent. In 2014, we dedicated \$25 million to fund a multi-year effort to assist at-risk animals in Los Angeles, and in 2018 we opened the ASPCA Behavioral Rehabilitation Center (BRC) in Weaverville, North Carolina. The BRC is the first-ever permanent facility dedicated to the rehabilitation and study of extremely fearful, unadoptable homeless dogs, most of whom are victims of cruelty or neglect.

This year, we'll be opening a new spay/neuter and primary pet care clinic in Miami, as well as a community veterinary center in the Bronx (with other CVCs planned for Brooklyn and

Manhattan). These efforts are primarily designed to help owners keep their pets at home and out of shelters, ensuring the safety of those animals while also conserving space and resources at local shelters for other animals in need.

At these centers, we will also develop new ways to shorten diagnostic and treatment protocols, which will make those processes less expensive and more accessible for clients while maintaining effective outcomes for the pets. We will then share these protocols and other community medicine insights through a variety of channels to inspire and elevate similar efforts in at-risk communities around the country.

To me, the story of the ASPCA is rich in heroism and impact. Inspired by those moments, we remain dedicated to fulfilling Henry Bergh's vision of a society that treats its animals with compassion and eliminates cruelty.

## How do you define the mission for the ASPCA?

Our primary goal is to ensure the lives of vulnerable animals are not only free from pain, cruelty, and suffering, but also proactively enriched both physically and emotionally by compassionate individuals, communities, and organizations. To accomplish these goals, the ASPCA employs a variety of tactics and initiatives that elevate the welfare of dogs, cats, horses, and farm animals, who are among the most at-risk and victimized animals in the country.

Many of our most recent programs address challenges of financial strain, food insecurity and poverty that have a profound impact on both the lives and safety of animals and their owners. Our research shows that these stresses can lead to animal relinquishment, poor quality of life, and even premature death – traumatic outcomes for families that put even more pressure on local shelters. We're addressing this problem on local and national levels by providing affordable and accessible services and resources that help pet owners keep their pets safely at home.

We believe that supporting this community-focused approach – alongside elevating traditional law enforcement roles including veterinary forensics and legal/legislative advocacy – has the greatest chance of catalyzing systemic change that protects animals throughout our society.

## How is the ASPCA addressing animal homelessness and what are the keys to driving impact in this area?

Approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters nationwide every year, 1.5 million of whom are euthanized. That number is dropping, but at-risk animals still need our help. Many people think the primary solution to the problem of animal homelessness lies in shelter adoptions. But while the 3.2 million shelter adoptions taking place each year are a critical part of helping these vulnerable animals survive and thrive, I believe our efforts to help them must go beyond traditional animal welfare partners and places.

Our modern tactics include major commitments to behavioral rehabilitation and training, animal relocation and community medicine programs that help low-income pet owners keep their pets by making veterinary services more affordable and accessible. We also encourage and support dedicated pet fostering programs, high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter practices and education and TNR (trap, neuter, return) efforts that tap into community compassion to help cats and kittens in need.

Canine behavioral rehabilitation is a relatively new approach with great potential to end the euthanasia of shelter dogs for behavior issues. In May 2018, we opened the ASPCA Behavioral Rehabilitation Center in Weaverville, North Carolina, the first-ever permanent facility dedicated to the rehabilitation and study of extremely fearful homeless dogs. There, we help animals overcome their trauma to become adoptable as well as train visiting shelters on effective techniques they take back to help vulnerable dogs in their communities.

Pet retention is another ASPCA initiative with tremendous promise for impact. In a 2015 ASPCA study of pet owners who reported giving up a pet within the last five years, 40 percent of those with annual incomes below \$50,000 indicated that free or low-cost vet care would have prevented them from relinquishing their pets and 30 percent said free or low-cost pet food would have helped them the most.

In New York City, our Community Engagement and Community Medicine programs already operate within underserved communities, and plans are in place to further serve local low-income residents with permanent ASPCA Community Veterinary Centers in the Bronx, upper Manhattan and Brooklyn. We are also partnering with Food Bank agencies in New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami to make pet food available to traditional clients who are also pet owners. The food comes with vouchers for free veterinary services, including spay/neuter surgery and critical vaccinations.

Overall, we are working to address the causes of animal homelessness as much as we do its consequences, so animals are kept out of shelters and far from harm before sheltering ever becomes necessary.

### **Will you provide an overview of the ASPCA's programs in addressing animal cruelty?**

Our Field Investigation and Response (FIR) team works hand-in-hand with our Legal Advocacy, Veterinary Forensics, Anti-Cruelty Behavior and Government Relations Teams to ensure we're responding effectively to cruelty on multiple fronts.

In 2018, our FIR team deployed to 23 operations across 15 different states, including multiple animal fighting and other cruelty cases, as well as disaster response operations involving wildfires, hurricanes and a lava flow in Hawaii. Our direct interventions in animal cruelty cases contributed to 489 criminal charges and 35 convictions.

Because seized animals are often in legal limbo for many months, we have also managed multiple temporary shelter operations across the country where animals received care and rehabilitation training until their ownership issues were decided. Our Government Relations team is currently supporting a federal bill called the HEART Act that would remove some of the obstacles that keep these animals from proceeding to adoption. The bill also requires defendants to reimburse the costs of caring for these animals.

On a local level, the ASPCA Humane Law Enforcement (HLE) department continues to work closely with the New York City Police Department (NYPD) since our collaboration launched citywide in January 2014. In this unique partnership, the NYPD takes the lead role in responding to all animal cruelty complaints in the five boroughs, and the ASPCA provides direct care for animal victims as well as law enforcement training and veterinary forensic and legal support. The ASPCA-NYPD Partnership has been incredibly successful, resulting in nearly 700 arrests by the NYPD in the last five years and more than 3,300 victims of alleged animal cruelty treated by the ASPCA.

In 2018 alone, the NYPD made 131 animal cruelty arrests, HLE and the NYPD assisted more than 900 animals in New York City and HLE conducted dozens of trainings to more than 3,800 NYPD personnel. In addition, the NYPD referred 120 cases to our Community Engagement team to provide critical services for responsible but underserved pet owners.

I personally believe dogfighting is among the most brutal and loathsome betrayals of animals. It exploits dogs' natural desire to please humans and exposes them to intense torture, suffering and often painful death. I spent years overseeing and deploying with our ASPCA anti-cruelty teams, but am still shocked at stories of animals conditioned with drugs to enhance their muscle mass and encourage aggressiveness, then viciously attacked, beaten, electrocuted and drowned.

Though illegal in every state, dogfighting persists due to the lure of profiting from this cruel activity. In the past nine years, the ASPCA has assisted more than 220 dogfighting cases in 23 states – from Alabama farms to New York City basements – impacting nearly 5,500 canine victims.

In 2013, the ASPCA assisted federal law enforcement agencies in one of the largest dogfighting cases in U.S. history, spanning four states and resulting in 10 arrests. A year later, we created National Dog Fighting Awareness Day (April 8) to increase awareness of the prevalence and cruelty of dogfighting, as well as to rally support behind a variety of laws and guidelines that combat dogfighting and ensure its victims not only find their way to safety, but also find their way home.

### **Will you discuss the ASPCA Strategic Cause Partnerships and the value of these partnerships?**

I'm a big fan of cause partnerships because they provide an effective way for us to inspire and activate new audiences of potential animal welfare supporters. They're also one of the most admirable and mutually-beneficial opportunities for nonprofit and for-profit entities to partner. We choose and cultivate these alliances carefully to ensure alignment with our mission and humane standards.

Some of our current cause partners, which span various consumer categories and activation campaigns, include AmazonSmile, Subaru, Bumble, west elm and Honey Nut Cheerios.

Our Subaru partnership is driven by their annual "Share the Love" event in which we participate alongside three other national charities. The more than \$22 million in funds we've received from Subaru during our 11 consecutive years of involvement in "Share the Love" have impacted more than 57,000 animals through ASPCA rescue operations, animal relocation programs and adoption support across the country.

I see these partnerships as wins for the partner and for us, but much more importantly for the animals saved and protected as a direct result of corporate and consumer compassion.

### **How critical has it been to continue to attract top talent to the ASPCA and to build a diverse workforce?**

With roughly 1,000 full-time employees at the ASPCA – many on the front lines of our work – having a skilled, committed and passionate staff is critical to accomplishing our goals on behalf of at-risk animals and communities. Diversity in our staff and in our perspectives plays an essential role in our success and our evolution. For these reasons, it's vitally important that we continue to attract, develop and retain outstanding talent who feel included and motivated to contribute.

A firm commitment to workforce diversity, equity and inclusion maximizes the contributions and potential of our staff by consciously including and welcoming a wide variety of voices. It also improves outcomes for animals by helping us connect authentically and effectively to a broad range of communities, partners, and clients.

### **What are your key priorities for the ASPCA as you look to the future?**

For me, looking to the future means identifying and targeting specific humane outcomes for vulnerable animals in the next five, 10 and even 20 years. In that long-range view, certain tactics stand out as having the highest potential for effecting systemic change, including increasing access to veterinary care by creating sustainable low-cost veterinary care programs in underserved communities, developing and sharing innovative approaches to canine rehabilitation and increasing legal protections for animals through expanded law enforcement, legislation and industry regulations.

As we pursue those priorities, we'll also be developing, sustaining and evolving ASPCA programs that benefit at-risk homeless horses and severely vulnerable kittens, raise standards and conditions for a billion cruelly exploited farm animals, and stop abusive breeding facilities set up to increase pet store profits. ●