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NEWS

LOW COST MOBILE VET IN NYC

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By Katy Washburne, Network Volunteer writer
When I called the Companion Animal Network in New York City about their new mobile vet unit which expands services for low income pet parents, I expected to get a volunteer. When a slightly hurried sounding man with a hint of a New York accent answered the phone, I introduced myself and asked for someone who could answer questions about the new mobile services.

"Oh. That would be me," he said. "I'm here at the clinic right now."

There was a lot of noise in the background: people talking, papers shuffling and unrecognizable clanging sounds, mixed with the fading in and out of a warbling cell phone connection. I could tell this man was really busy. Even with his gracious attitude, I couldn't help but feel I was interrupting him.

"Hold on dear," he asked of me less than 30 seconds into the call; another phone rang in. I put my phone on speaker next to my computer, poised to go through my prepared set of questions. I could hear his side of the conversation.

"You don't have to euthanize your animal for that," I heard him say. "It's only a broken knee. We can fix it." There was a pause. "We can do it for \$1000." Another pause. "I know. I know ... no, I'm not a vet, but I know the costs."

My heart sank. Someone out there was considering putting their pet down because they couldn't afford surgery. When he picked the phone back up, I asked his name.

"My name is Garo," he said, and my heart raced a bit. This was the man I had hoped to talk to. This was Garo Alexanian, founder of The Companion Animal Network. He was actually there onsite helping animals on the front line and answering my phone call. Why did my heart race? He isn't your average "volunteer." During my research on the organization for my story, I had become an instant fan of this man and the organization he'd built. He wasn't "fitting" animal rescue into his life. His life is animal rescue.

Their website is extensive. Not only have they been involved in key animal advocacy legislation and education since 1989, but they are also a part of the [Mayor's Alliance for New York City's Animals](#), an organization of over a 160 groups dedicated to end the killing of healthy and treatable cats and dogs at animal care and control shelters in New York City.

Companion Animal Network's newest endeavor, The Low Cost Vet Mobile, is just one more attempt to keep as many companion animals as possible from being turned over to shelters or from being euthanized because standard veterinarian services are too expensive for the average pet owner.

For Garo Alexanian it all started in 1989 with an abandoned German shepherd named Rodney. Alexanian tried to save Rodney by sending him to a shelter in Connecticut that promised to keep him alive until they found him a good home. When they didn't keep their promise, Alexanian was so devastated by the shelter's betrayal that he soon made it his life's mission to prevent the unnecessary euthanizing of pets. You can read more about the story on their website.

As Alexanian hung up from the phone call with the woman who wanted to put her dog down due to medical costs, I could hear the frustration in his voice. He'd had this conversation before. The woman had already spent \$700 on a vet consultation and x-rays at a local veterinary clinic only to be told that surgery for her injured pet would cost an additional \$4,000, a number too steep to bear for most people and even worse in hard economic times. Had she come to the mobile vet clinic first, the total cost of care would have been a \$1,000—including the orthopedic surgeon, x-rays and all follow-up care.

"Now you have someone who is already \$700 in the hole. With only \$300 more dollars, this animal could have been taken care of here. This is a typical story," he tells me. A dog or cat gets hit by a car, or falls out of a window, the owners take it to a vet, and they are charged an arm and a leg just to get the animal seen. By the time the surgery bill is discussed, they have already paid as much as a month's rent.

The mobile vet unit began its services on July 25, 2009. It spends two days a week at a shelter in Manhattan and one day in Brooklyn. They will be adding an additional day in Brooklyn. In just over three months, they have treated over 586 cases and counting. They have to turn patients away at each clinic but only those with less serious issues such as vaccinations.

When I asked Alexanian for a picture of himself for the story, he wanted to make sure the story wasn't about him. He wanted the focus to be on getting the word out to low income individuals in New York City. The difference between knowing and not knowing about the "Low Cost Vet Mobile" can be the difference between life and death in New York City.

For More Information

Due to overwhelming demand for low cost services the [Vet Mobile](#) recently added a second day in Manhattan. With a staff of six veterinarians, three veterinary technicians and volunteer administrators, the Vet Mobile is now parked in front of the Manhattan shelter of New York City Animal Control ("NYCACC") at 326 East 110 St. every Friday and Saturday at noon, and the Brooklyn NYCACC shelter at 2336 Linden Blvd. on Wednesdays. Appointments are only required for elective surgeries. Other issues are triaged first come first serve.

To inquire, call 718-544-PETS.