

## Veterinarians on Wheels Treat East Harlem's Ailing Animals

Pet owners and animals wait all day to be seen by the traveling clinic called Low Cost Mobile Vet.



- by [Sarah Jenks](#)
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Nichelle Bullock rolls her tabby cat, Truppa, asleep in a crate atop her son's skateboard, down the block to the corner of East 111th Street and First Avenue.

On a Saturday afternoon, they join dozens of other cats, dogs and humans waiting on lawn chairs and blankets and in cars, surrounding a 1997 RV parked on the corner. Truppa is suffering from severe constipation. "I just want my baby to feel better," Bullock coos to her cat.

The owners and pets will wait hours — sometimes all day — for their turn to climb into this full service veterinary clinic, called Low Cost Vet Mobile, which charges 30 to 50 percent less than other local veterinary clinics.

Low Cost Vet Mobile circulates two trucks that visit all five boroughs, but spends all day Friday and Saturday — its busiest days — in East Harlem. The clinic targets low-income neighborhoods lacking other veterinary offices, hoping to deter owners thinking of relinquishing their pets because they can't afford their medical care.

"We knew that the surrenders to animal control, which end up in euthanasia, were 50 percent related to medical costs that people couldn't afford," says Garo Alexanian, 66, who founded the non-profit in 2009.

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this country saved us," says Alexanian. His response has been saving animals.



A broadcast engineer who has spent decades as an animal activist, Alexanian oversees the operation but isn't a veterinarian himself. He keeps costs low through high volume. On average, Low Cost Vet Mobile can treat about 40 animals a day. Calls to local veterinarians verify his lower prices, especially for emergency surgeries.

Because the mobile clinic works on a first-come-first-served basis, pet owners line up early to get on the list, which typically fills up by mid-day.

Yissel Rosario and her daughter Debora sit on lawn chairs outside the van with their white shih tzu mix, Susy. She needs vaccinations and an eye exam. When they arrived at 9 a.m. from the Bronx, 26 pet owners were already in line ahead of

them. Debora Rosario says they called other clinics to but couldn't find affordable vet care. The wait is "worth it," she says, as Susy tries to jump on her lap. "Because it's something she needs."

The mobile service sees "more patients a day than any other New York animal hospital," says veterinarian Ashaf Hussein, 50, who splits his time between the van and an animal hospital in the Bronx. "It gives me a chance to see cases that I would never see in another clinic."

The van arrives between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. and the team works until about 10 p.m. A counter on the back of the van indicates where patients stand in the lineup; they can also check their status on Low Cost Mobile Vet's website. That way, people can leave, do other things and come back when it's their turn.

On board the van, every nook and cranny of available space is in use. Kennels line the entrance. What was once likely a small restroom now holds a computer with a chair. The cubbies surrounding the examination table are filled with vaccines, medications and medical instruments.

To make it even more crowded, a team of four assists the veterinarian. Vet tech David Fernandez handles the animals — lifting them onto the table, holding them while the vet examines their ears and eyes. Medical secretary Joan Kim takes notes during the exam and calculates payment. Vet tech Rosa Morales manages the list of waiting patients while triage manager Maor Azoulay prepares vaccines and medications.





After Aybar waited several hours, Fifi Sparkel's exam takes less than 15 minutes. "It would be more expensive to go somewhere else," said Aybar. "Coming here has its pros and cons. I like the concept, it's just the waiting time."

Next up: Tiffany Carter with her pit bull Tea, who looks very nervous. "Hey mami, hey mami," Carter croons to comfort her. The vet determines that Tea has injured her leg and will need surgery. He prescribes pain medication, and instructs Carter to walk Tea no further than around the block. The surgery will cost \$2,000. "When you're financially ready, come back for blood work," says vet tech Rosales.

Using a van not only allows the vets to serve many neighborhoods, Alexanian says, but also avoids the restrictions landlords place on permanent locations, where keeping dogs overnight can lead to neighborhood complaints about barking.

"I suspect in a given year, we do probably about 500 surgeries," Alexanian says. The practice contracts with animal hospitals for "advanced surgeries — splenectomy, organ removals, tumor removals."

One of the biggest challenges for Low Cost Mobile Vet, Alexanian says, has been finding quality staff. He also contends with maintenance for the mobile clinic, powered by a generator that needs replacing every few years.

"When you're doing high volume, you have high maintenance," says Alexanian. "At the start I was operating on three hours of sleep."

However, Alexanian says his efforts have proved worthwhile, helping to reduce the number of relinquished pets. According to reports from the Animal Care Centers of NYC, the non-profit that manages animal control under a city contract, its shelters took in 40,718 cats in dogs in 2009, but only 21,833 last year.





Now retired, Alexanian spent several decades as a lobbyist, advocating for changes in New York's animal control policies. In 2016, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced \$10 million in capital funding for two new animal shelters in the Bronx and Queens, the "largest investment in the animal shelter system since the City began operating them in the 1990s", a 2016 press release says.

Alexanian has used the proceeds from Low Cost Mobile Vet — \$300,000 of its \$1 million gross last year — to pay off the mortgage for a Queens building where he plans to open a new 24-hour low cost animal hospital and rescue center next year. He hopes the city will designate his new facility as the official shelter for Queens.

Outside the van, Lisa Cruz is waiting with one of her four dogs, a rat terrier named Jenny. Without Low Cost Vet Mobile, she wouldn't be able to afford their care. "When it comes to quick response, like an emergency — they're here," she says.