



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrew Gounardes

## Sen. Gounardes, Assemblymember Simone Introduce Bill to Penalize Drivers for Injury & Death of Pets and Service Animals

ANDREW GOUNARDES September 24, 2024

| ISSUE: **SAFE STREETS, ANIMAL WELFARE**



The PAWS Act would increase penalties for hit and runs with pets

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**NEW YORK, NY** — New York State Senator Andrew Gounardes and Assemblymember Tony Simone joined animal advocates, pet owners and several furry friends at the Chelsea Waterside Dog Park today to announce the introduction of their new bill, [the “Protecting](#)

[Animals Walking on the Street” \(PAWS\) Act \(S9915/A10660\)](#), which will increase penalties against a driver when a pet is injured or killed in a car crash.

There are currently over 1.1 million household dogs and cats in New York City. These pets are considered family members by many New Yorkers, yet under current law, injuring or killing a pet or service animal with a motor vehicle results in a fine equivalent to an illegal U-turn. As the number of pets in New York rises, the risk that they are killed by reckless driving increases as well.

In addition to being cherished companions, these animals serve a particularly crucial role for people with disabilities by working as guide dogs and service animals. A fine for committing a hit-and-run that injures a seeing-eye dog could be as low as \$50 for a first offense, an amount that sends a message to people with disabilities that the animals that they rely on every day are not worth more than a parking ticket to the state of New York.

This bill recognizes the importance of such animals by adding a new category of “companion animals” to the “due care statute” under vehicle traffic law, as it already does for pedestrians, cyclists, sheep, cattle and goats. If a driver fails to do so and causes physical injury, they can incur a fine of up to \$500 or imprisonment of up to 15 days, the same penalty already imposed for pedestrians and cyclists.

The bill would also increase fines when a driver leaves the scene without reporting the incident (i.e., a hit-and-run). The new law would update the fee structure for a hit-and-run of a companion animal from \$50-\$100 to \$200-\$500 for a first offense, and from \$50-\$150 to \$200-\$750 for subsequent offenses. The law would also impose a higher fee structure for a hit-and-run of a service dog from \$50-\$150 to \$250-\$550 for a first offense, and from \$150-\$300 to \$350-\$700 for subsequent offenses.

Protecting animals from reckless driving is a priority for many New Yorkers, especially those that rely on a service animal. These increased fees would act as a deterrent against reckless driving and ensure animals can travel safely on our streets.

“I walk my pup Radar on our streets every day. He is a member of my family and means the world to me. After learning about [the horrific act of traffic violence](#) committed against Ginia Bellafonte and her dog Chicky, the lack of accountability for that reckless driver showed me that something had to be done,” said **Assemblymember Tony Simone**. “Our four-legged family members, service animals, and their families must know that justice will be served when these tragedies strike. The PAWS Act will classify our furry friends equally as victims of vehicular violence just like the rest of the family.”

“Over one million pets call New York home, and they play an important role in our lives, whether they be service animals, guide dogs, or just members of the family,” said **State Senator Andrew Gounardes**. “But right now, our traffic law treats them like disposable property. The PAWS Act recognizes the dignity and value of these nonhuman New Yorkers, and ensures our laws send a clear message to reckless drivers: paws your vehicle to let pets pass.”

**Senator Brad Hoylman-Sigal said:** “Pets are much more than just animals. They are companions, members of our families, and in the case of service animals they are a crucial resource that disabled New Yorkers need to live their everyday lives. But right now the lives of those animals are dramatically undervalued and as a result they are suffering from the same traffic violence that is plaguing all New Yorkers but getting none of the attention or legal protection humans get. That changes with the PAWS Act, which will increase the penalties for injuring or killing companion animals in car crashes. I’m grateful to Assemblymember Simone and Senator Gounardes for fighting for our pets and I look forward to voting for the PAWS Act.”

“Our pets are members of our family,” said **Assembly Member Harvey Epstein**. “Nearly every day for the past 10 years, I have walked my rescue dog Homer through the East Village. Reckless driving endangers their lives and the current penalties do not adequately account for the damage done. Especially for people with disabilities, these animals are a lifeline and the penalties for harming one should be more than the price of a parking ticket”.

“As we know too well, reckless driving is a threat to the safety of our communities, and animals are included,” said **Council Member Erik Bottcher**. “Our pets deserve the same protections from vehicle violence. I applaud my colleague on the west side Assembly Member Tony Simone and Senator Gounardes for introducing this legislation, and I urge my state colleagues to support the bill’s swift passage.”

“When a pet is struck by a vehicle, it’s not just an accident, it’s a tragedy for a family. Yet, our laws don’t adequately reflect their status within our lives,” said **Kathleen Schatzmann, Strategic Legislative Affairs Manager for the Animal Legal Defense Fund**. “This bill will raise the penalty for harming or killing a companion animal or service animal, and by doing so, the bill will also raise awareness that pets are more than just animals—they’re cherished family members, and for those who rely on service animals—essential partners in daily life. We are grateful to Assemblymember Tony Simone for introducing the Protecting Animals Walking on the Street (PAWS) Act, highlighting our relationship with animals with whom we share our homes and lives and consider to be family.”

**Allie Taylor, President of Voters for Animal Rights**, said: “As an advocacy organization working for animal’s rights, I am thrilled that Assemblymember Simone and Senator Gounardes have introduced this important legislation. It is ludicrous that drivers can hit and kill one of our pets with little more enforcement than a parking ticket. I am a strong supporter of this bill, and I look forward to the legislature passing it this year.”

**Libby Post, Executive Director, NYS Animal Protection Federation** said, “It’s time for the state to take a serious look at the penalties regarding animal crimes and cruelty. We can no longer afford for those guilty of committing these crimes to be punished with just a slap on the wrist. Harming or killing a companion animal with a motor vehicle needs to be taken seriously and Assemblymember Simone is doing just that. Our thanks go to him for raising this issue and to the other members of the Assembly who will sponsor this important piece of legislation.”

“NAMI-NYC supports individuals living with mental illness in their recovery journey, which can include support and therapy pets. We have a vibrant community at NAMI-NYC who utilizes our Pet Therapy group, one of 40 support and social groups for New Yorkers,” shared **Matt Kudish, CEO, National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City (NAMI-NYC)**, helping families and individuals affected by mental health challenges. **NAMI-NYC** offers free education classes, 40 support groups, family mentoring, a Helpline in 180 languages, and more.

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## 2023-S9915

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- - In Committee Assembly
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[Relates to injury of domestic and companion animals by motorists](#)

September 18, 2024

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Sponsored by [Andrew Gounardes](#)

Do you support this bill?