Recognizing and Responding to Rescue Hoarders

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Defining “Animal Hoarder”

“Someone who accumulates a large number of animals;
Fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation and veterinary care;
And fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation and even death) or the environment (severe overcrowding, extremely unsanitary conditions) or the negative effect of the collection on their own health and well-being and on that of other household members.”

Dr. Gary Patronek in Public Health Reports (114), 1999
Animal’s Farm Home, Ellenville, NY 1987 – one of the first “Rescue Hoarder” operations with over 1000 animals kept by Justin McCarthy, dubbed “Dr. Doolittle of the Catskills” in a Reader’s Digest profile.

Demographics of “Animal Hoarders”

- Majority (over 2/3) are women
- Majority (about 2/3) are unmarried
- Most begin hoarding in their 30’s
- Generally well-educated, with some college
- All income levels are represented
Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

1. Preoccupation with Their Animals
   - Animals take up most of their time
   - Animals take up most of their money
   - Little contact with others not involved in maintaining the animals

2. Presence of Enablers Who Help Perpetuate the Problem
   - Relatives
   - Staff and/or volunteers
   - Public officials
   - Other shelters or animal agencies
   - Society at large
Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

3. Neglect of Personal, Physical, and Environmental Conditions

- Neglect of personal health and hygiene
- Neglect of animal health and hygiene
- Presence of masses of other accumulated items, e.g. bottles, newspapers, debris
- General decay and disrepair of household

Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

4. Claims of Persecution

- Local animal control or humane society is seen as the enemy
- Little or no attempt to adopt or otherwise place animals
- Assistance from outside groups usually unwanted or futile
- Legal assistance is often rejected
Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

5. Denial and Alibis for Behavior

- Serious health problems are minimized
- Environmental problems are minimized
- Dead animals are ignored or treated as if alive
- Short-term excuses are given for long-term problems
- Many hoarders think of themselves as “rescuers”

6. Repetition or Cycling of Addictive Behavior

- Without supervision ... VIRTUALLY ALL hoarders resume their activities
- Without ties to the community, many hoarders leave the area and begin again elsewhere
- Lifelong monitoring is ESSENTIAL
Psychology of Hoarding

What makes someone become an animal hoarder?
General Types of Animal Hoarders

- Overwhelmed Caregivers
- Exploiter Hoarders
- Incipient Hoarder
- Breeder-Hoarder
- Rescue Hoarders

Overlap may exist and hoarders may show characteristics of different types at different times

Overwhelmed Caregivers

- Some awareness of the problems
- Problem triggered by change in circumstance – health, finance
- Strong attachment to animals as family
- Population acquired passively
- Does not deny problems, but minimizes them
- Less secretive, more likely to comply with agencies
- May involve psychological disorders
Exploiter Hoarder

- Acquires animals for own psychological needs
- Tends to have true sociopathic or personality disorders
- Little empathy for people or harm to animals
- In extreme denial of situation
- Rejects any outsider’s authority; believes his/her knowledge and ability is superior
- Manipulative, cunning, lies, cheats, steals to achieve ends
- Actively plans to evade laws

Rescue Hoarders

- Sense of mission to save produces unavoidable compulsion
- Fear of death of self and animals, opposes euthanasia
- Animals acquired actively, sometimes surreptitiously
- Believes he/she has unique ability to care – little or no adoption
- Avoids authorities/impedes access, litigious!!
- Usually has network of enablers
### Legitimate Rescue Groups vs. Rescue Hoarders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RESCUE GROUP</th>
<th>RESCUE HOADER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Known, manageable</td>
<td>Often unknown, overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intakes</td>
<td>Limited, selective, often</td>
<td>Unlimited, actively seeks new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discouraged</td>
<td>animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>Actively seeks to re-home</td>
<td>Usually avoids any placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breeding</td>
<td>Most animals s/n or separated to</td>
<td>Accidental or even intentional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prevent breeding</td>
<td>breeding is common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Often diverse sources, usually</td>
<td>Often self-supported but may</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-profit</td>
<td>have non-profit status or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>exploit “angels”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Adequate, stable may have paid</td>
<td>Inadequate, family, transient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>staff</td>
<td>volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary Care</td>
<td>Adequate to excellent, may have</td>
<td>Inadequate, often emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>staff or contract</td>
<td>only if any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offense History</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Often has previous charges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Quality of Life

- **High quality of life**: Freedom from hunger & thirst, freedom from pain, injury, disease, freedom from fear and distress, freedom from discomfort, socialization.
- **Good quality of life**: Freedom from hunger & thirst, freedom from pain, injury, disease, freedom from fear and distress, freedom to express normal behavior.
- **Borderline quality of life**: Minimal caregiving competency, freedom from hunger & thirst, freedom from pain, injury, disease, freedom from fear and distress.
- **Poor quality of life**: Freedom from hunger & thirst, freedom from pain, injury, disease, freedom from fear and distress, freedom to express normal behavior.
- **A life not worth living**: Freedom from hunger & thirst, freedom from pain, injury, disease, freedom from fear and distress, freedom to express normal behavior.

- **Always**: Competent caregiving; welfare safeguarded, nurturing environment.
- **Often**: Borderline caregiving; animals at risk.
- **Rarely**: Incompetent caregiving; animals in risk.
- **Never**: Cruelty typically prosecuted.

*Patronek, G. 2010. Adapted from FAWC, 2009*
Available at sheltervet.org and aspcapro.org/asv

This document helps educate the Court and others to what is considered a reasonable standard of care by a shelter or rescue

Common Excuses for Inadequate Care

• Short term excuse for long-standing problem
  — “My handyman has been sick this week”
  — “I hurt my back and can’t lift the sacks of food”
• Recent Acquisition (but no supporting paperwork or other contradictory evidence – e.g. witness accounts)
  — “They came in this way…”
  — “We just got them…”
• “The ‘Hospice’ Argument
  — “We are providing death with dignity”
  — “We keep the bodies in the cage for a few days to give the soul time to depart”
### Intervention Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Hoarder</th>
<th>Persuasion</th>
<th>Threat of Legal Action</th>
<th>Prosecution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploiter</td>
<td>Unlikely to be effective</td>
<td>Unlikely to be intimidated</td>
<td>Usually essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescue Hoarder</td>
<td>Unlikely to be effective, at least initially</td>
<td>Must offer potential for scaled-down operation</td>
<td>May be Required when threats fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed Caregiver</td>
<td>Likely to be receptive</td>
<td>May be enough to reduce recidivism</td>
<td>Often unnecessary or counter-productive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Special Concerns in Responding to Rescue Hoarders

- Usually intelligent, articulate, media-savvy and litigious
- Often have current support from local agencies and organizations
- May have had prior support from agencies that are now investigating them
- Large numbers of animals present housing, veterinary, and zoonotic challenges to responders
- Social services does not view them as a threat to self or others
- Prosecutors unwilling to pursue charges without solid evidence of cruelty
- Judges insensitive to the severity of the problem
- Little prospect of restitution
Supporters picket court on behalf of Linda Bruno, operator of Tiger Ranch Cat Sanctuary

Conditions at Tiger Ranch documented by PA SPCA and ASPCA
Sentencing in Tiger Ranch (July 2009)

- Charged with over 500 counts based on 750 animals
- Pled guilty to 12 counts of misdemeanor cruelty, 2 counts of tampering with public records
- $212,000 in fines and restitution
- 27 years probation
- 2 years house arrest
- 6 months in jail (served 37 days)
- Dissolution of organization
- … many animals placed by PA SPCA

Special Investigative Issues for Rescue Hoarding Situations

- Preserve media evidence – archive potentially misleading websites, print every page (may disappear when action is taken)
- Preserve Facebook, Twitter traffic
- Follow the Money – may lead to Federal charges that can provide for monitoring across state lines if operation moves
- Review IRS 990 Forms for discrepancies (e.g. little funding spent on vet care, payments to family members)
- Contact IRS, State Attorney General, US Attorney
- Archive fund-raising appeals
- Be prepared for special forensic requirements, e.g. excavation of clandestine graves
- Be alert to higher risk of zoonotic diseases
RESPONSES AND SOLUTIONS

Outcome Goals for Hoarding Cases

- Care for people at risk – elderly, children, handicapped
- Relapse Prevention
- Long-term mandatory psychiatric assessment/counseling
- Long-term probation
- Probation to include no-contact with animals order
- Unannounced monitoring of home
- Restitution to agencies providing care for animals
- Possible jail time, as a deterrent to re-offense
- Care for and/or removal of animals at risk
- Possible prohibition of occupancy
Components of a Settlement

- Specify how many animals may be cared for in any capacity, in any premises
- Require sterilization of any animals that are kept
- Specify details of care, plan for vet care and keeping of records
- Require compliance with all relevant laws
- Specify consequences of failure to comply

For Further Information

Tufts Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium
http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding.html

ASPCApro Fighting Cruelty
http://www.aspca.org/fighting-animal-cruelty.php

ASPCA
http://www.aspca.org/cruelty
Resource on community response to hoarding

http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding.html

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http://www.aspcaapro.org/upcoming-webinars.php