

Animal hoarding

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Animal hoarding is a community problem that is not well understood. Animal hoarders accumulate large numbers of animals that they do not have the ability to care for adequately. In these situations, both the animals and the humans in the household suffer. The house can become covered with feces and carcasses, and the ammonia levels become dangerously high. Sometimes, hoarders start out with good intentions and the situation gradually gets out of their control. However, often the hoarders have deep psychological problems that need to be addressed. The best way to approach animal hoarding in each community is with a multi-disciplinarian task force that is equipped to deal with the many intertwining aspects of each hoarder case.

Definition

Animal hoarding is generally defined by the following characteristics:

- Accumulation of a more than typical number of animals
- Lack of appropriate care for the animals, including nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care
- Lack of response to the deteriorating condition of the animals, including disease and death
- Denial about the extent of the situation
- Neglect of the human residents' health and well-being, including the hoarder herself

Sometimes, an animal hoarder will claim to run a no-kill shelter or a rescue group. In these situations, what ultimately determines if the person is a hoarder is the condition of the animals and the level of negative impact on the human being living in the same quarters.

Effects of hoarding

Both the animals and the humans involved suffer due to the excessive amount of animals at one location.

- **Health of the animals:** The animals lack the food, water, sanitation and vet care that they need to remain healthy and strong.
- **Behavioral problems** in the animals: Due to the unnatural and extreme crowding in the house and the lack of socialization that the animals experience, the animals suffer from behavioral problems (Berry et al 2003).
- Due to the health and behavioral problems of the animals, when they are seized, they are at a higher risk for **euthanasia** (Berry et al 2003).
- **Health and well being of the people** in the household: living in a house full of urine and feces is not healthy for people or animals. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), an ammonia concentration of 50 ppm or higher is "an extreme irritant" and that concentrations of 300 ppm or greater are "a direct threat to life and health". In one hoarding situation, the ammonia level was measured at 152 ppm (after ventilation), and it is believed that the level is often much higher (Berry et al 2003).
- **Community expense:** It takes a tremendous amount of resources and time to remove the animals in a hoarding case. The shelter then must provide care for the animals, usually at its own expense. Firefighters or police also must use their time and equipment when there are hazardous materials (for example, high ammonia concentrations, unstable structures, or fire hazards).

In addition, "the local government may also incur bills for numerous visits by health and county zone inspectors to the hoarder's property, for clean-up or demolition of the property, for court appointed attorneys who defend some offenders, and for the cost of administrative hearings." (Berry et al 2003).

The hoarders

The most common animal hoarders are middle-aged or elderly females, especially those who are single, disabled, unemployed, and living without working appliances (Berry et al 2003). However, hoarders can be male or female, of all ages, and from different professional backgrounds.

- Often, hoarders are isolated, elderly people, especially those with dementia
- Many hoarders are unable to care for themselves, let alone hundreds of animals
- Often, animal hoarders hoard inanimate objects also (Berry et al 2003)
- Previously, it was thought that hoarders likely had material deprivation in their childhood, but recently, research has shown that a more likely factor is a household of chaos without clear rules and with shaky bonds with parents or guardians (Allan 2004)
- Hoarders often have problems with addiction (Handy 1994)
- Many psychological problems are associated with hoarding, including schizophrenia, focal delusion, addiction, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), zoophilia, and others. Of course, each individual animal hoarder has a different background, motivations, and mental state. There is no single psychological disorder that causes animal hoarding.
- Sometimes, animal hoarders are people who function normally in society, want to help animals, and gradually take in more animals than they can handle. However, according to Randall Lockwood of the HSUS, most of the hoarder's actions are a result of "true pathology", not good intentions gone wrong (Handy 1994).

Multi-disciplinary approach

The best way to both prevent and respond to animal hoarding is a community-based, multi-disciplinary approach. Animal hoarding is a condition with multiple aspects, and the solution to the problem should be just as holistic. The following members of the community should coordinate to maximize their effectiveness:

- **Animal care and control agencies should be the lead agency:** Also when multiple animal groups work together, they can pool their resources to increase their strength.
- **Adult protective services/senior care groups:** These groups have expertise in mental problems (dementia), disabilities and isolation – common problems of animal hoarders.
- **Social workers:** Social workers have expertise in dealing with the social problems many hoarders experience.
- **Mental health agencies, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other therapists:** These groups can provide medication or therapy for a hoarder with psychological problems.
- **Veterinarians:** Vets can determine how severe the animals' conditions are and can offer testimony in court if necessary.
- **Neighborhood code enforcement officials:** If animal control can't access a house, the neighborhood code enforcement

can have the house condemned; for example, a house can be condemned if the ammonia level is too high, or there may be a rule limiting the number of companion animals per area of land.

- **Fire department officials:** These officials can cite hoarders for safety violations.
- **Board of health officials:** The board of health has expertise in recognizing when there are health risks to the resident or the neighbors.
- **State department of agriculture officials:** For livestock hoarding

Communities that have established a task force approach to hoarders are finding it easier to identify these situations and address the needs of the animals and the human beings. Although each task force has different approaches, some meet on a monthly basis and review all active cases, while others convene when one member of the task force is faced with a potential hoarder. Once there is a case before the task force, the group discusses all known aspects of the situation and then collectively develops a plan on how to intervene. Sometimes the situation needs to be monitored for a while and others need a plan right away. Some of the discussion and questions that need answering are: What are the type(s) of animal and number? Where will they be housed? Does the human need to be hospitalized? Is the house inhabitable or will it need to be condemned? Will this person willingly relinquish the animals or will this need court or legal intervention?

Outreach and education

Public outreach and education are critical for preventing animal hoarding situations from getting out of hand. In particular, special emphasis should be placed on educating:

- **The public:** One benefit of having a large, interdisciplinary task force is the increased awareness of animal hoarding in the community. With increase awareness, the public will be less likely to support the nice cat lady in a hoarding situation.
- **Prosecutors and judges:** Prosecutors and judges should be familiar with the psychological aspects of animal hoarding before they are faced with a case.
- **The media:** It is important for the media to be familiar with the significance of animal hoarding behavior so that they can pass this on to the public. The media has the power to influence the public to see the depth and complexity of the hoarding problem.
- **Meter-readers, utility employees, mail carriers, cable TV employees:** These people may be the first to observe a hoarding situation and their early detection could prevent the hoarder from getting out of hand (Allan 2004).

Intervention or prosecution

All hoarding situations require intervention to end the cruelty to the animals and address the psychological problems of the hoarder. Whether criminal prosecution is necessary depends on the individual hoarder and the situation. Some of the more problematic aspects of dealing with hoarders for animal control officers are ability to conduct a full investigation of the home and ability to obtain search warrants to get access to the home. Animal control often must not only investigate the situation, but based on the investigation make a decision on what type of intervention is warranted. Not only is there the prosecution aspect to consider but animal control must also address how the agency will care for the animals involved which can often be in the hundreds. These issues cause hoarding to be one of the more difficult cases to handle. Many times the situation is not serious enough for prosecution and the office must attempt to establish some sort of relationship with the hoarder and monitor the situation.

Often during this process assistance can be offered to place some of the animals, provide spay and neuter services etc. However, this is usually refused. It is usually up to the animal control officer and the task force to work together to create a plan of action. This plan allows the agencies to work together to decide what step is necessary. The plan can address the mental health care for the person involved, a court hearing for the animal control to obtain custody of the animals and remove them from the unhealthy environment, and provide some mechanism for ongoing monitoring of the situation so it does not re-appear.

- Without a long-term plan and support for the hoarder, the relapse rate (**recidivism**) is near 100% (Berry et al 2003)
- When the hoarder has good intentions, successful **intervention** involves the following: take the animals out of the home, sterilize and treat any animals that can be returned to the hoarder, monitor the hoarder to prevent a relapse, and provide mental health and/or adult protection services (Handy 1994). The three methods of intervention used are:
 - Cooperative approach: working with the hoarder and convincing him/her to give up some of the animals and spay and neuter the ones that stay with them.
 - Court order: limiting the number of animals a hoarder can have in the house and allowing the shelter to monitor the hoarder
 - Social services: treating the psychological problems the hoarder has
- Other times, **criminal prosecution** is the best approach:
 - Animal control must plan in advance of a seizure of the animals in order to provide proper housing for the animals. This can place a huge burden on the agency that must be considered.
 - A hoarder can be charged with animal cruelty and neglect
 - Jail time, fines, and probation are appropriate goals, but ultimately it is best to prohibit the hoarder from owning animals again (Handy 1994).

Different legislative approaches

More and more communities are considering different types of legislation that provides some relief to the usual long term housing issues that are so common with legal intervention and court processes. Forfeiture and disposition laws assist agencies with the authority to take control of animals that are subjected to cruelty as a result of hoarding. This type of law is most needed to provide animal control officers with the authority to seize animals in cases of directly-inflicted abuse, in neglect cases or in animal fighting cases in order to provide medical attention to injured and/or sick animals, and to protect them from future abuse.

Another type of law called disposition laws provide courts with the authority to determine the disposition of an animal who has been seized due to animal cruelty or neglect. Often, animals seized in criminal cases remain the "property" of the person accused of harming them. Rather than being adopted out or euthanized, these animals wind up being held as evidence for months or even years at a time. The costs of keeping these animals can be overwhelming to the shelter charged with "holding" them, especially in large-scale abuse cases, such as in cases of neglect, hoarding, or animal fighting, when many animals are confiscated. Ideally, disposition laws allow for an expedited hearing, so that ownership of the animals can be quickly determined, and the criminal case can be pursued without the requirement that the animals be held pending resolution of the case.

Because of the limited resources of most animal shelters, forfeiture and disposition laws are absolutely necessary for animal control officers to be able to respond to and effectively deal with animal abuse cases. Forfeiture and disposition laws allow animal shelters to resolve the financial and housing issues imposed by animal cruelty cases by allowing them to either adopt the animals

