

HOARDERS

Jill Posanski, Waukesha County Humane Officer

*Originally printed in the December 2007 issue
of HAWS' "Tattle Tails" newsletter*

HAWS and the Waukesha County Humane Officers come in contact with animal hoarders numerous times each year. The discovery of approximately 200 cats at a rental property in Ottawa in 2005 and an intervention with a breeder of Westies in 2006 made for 2 of the larger, more noteworthy of these occurrences. These situations tax the physical, mental and financial resources of a shelter.

A hoarder, in animal welfare terms, is defined as “one who accumulates large numbers of animals; who isn’t keeping up with their feeding, sanitation and medical care. One who fails to recognize deteriorating condition of the animals, the environment, and often their own health.” It is common for the hoarder not to know how many animals are in their home. They believe they are helping animals despite the presence of very sick and/or dead animals and filthy living conditions. Hoarding can be sign of a mental illness.

Researchers place the rate of reoccurrence at 100% if the hoarder does not use medication and counseling. If every animal has been removed, hoarders will try to replace them in a matter of weeks -- even if the hoarder is court-ordered not to have animals. Removing the animals from neglectful conditions is not the whole solution; it helps those individual animals, but more must be done to prevent the predictable next collection.

It is very common for hoarders, once discovered and “shut down,” to start collecting animals at a new address. Some hoarders even rent properties to house animals, while they live elsewhere! It doesn’t help that the typical hoarder is very private and reclusive in their activities.

While big cases make the news, the small cases often go undetected until the hoarder has a health incident or has to be away from home for an extended time.

You can help with awareness to this widespread and underreported problem. Things to watch for include cluttered yards and doorways (hoarders often can’t throw away things like newspapers, clothes or old appliances), closed blinds or curtains shredded by cat claws and scratched window frames. There is usually a strong odor by the doors and window wells. Sometimes empty litter and food bags/cans are outside or along the hallways.

Also, you can encourage people you know that are looking to place or surrender a pet to utilize humane shelters, like HAWS. (Hoarders, along with other animal abusers, often answer “free to good home” ads so those are especially dangerous!) Shelters screen adopters and can protect the animals in their care from being adopted by hoarders. Even if the shelter has to euthanize a pet, that is more humane than the fate awaiting them if warehoused with a hoarder.

If you suspect a problem of hoarding in your neighborhood or with a relative, the animals need you to voice your concerns. It is the only chance the animals have for relief from their suffering.