

Humane Officer's Corner by Jill Posanski

What happens after the Hoarding?

Hoarding is defined as the practice of amassing and keeping, for prolonged periods, more animals than an individual can properly care for. Medical research indicates the force behind hoarding is chemical imbalance in the brain. Most people hear of cat ladies and wonder why they want so many cats. I do not think it is a "want" so much as an obsession with obtaining and "saving" something. This is different than the "puppy mill" breeder. Profit is the motivating force behind volume breeding. If the conditions in a breeder kennel are inhumane and filthy, it is likely recognized by the operator, but ignored.

Here is what happens after the situation is exposed. If hoarding conditions are bad enough, animals can be legally seized. If conditions are not criminally inhumane, the hoarder has legal rights to keep their pets. Most "outsiders" and family members get frustrated at not being able to surrender someone else's rights to their pets. Eventually living conditions decline to a point where the animals may be removed (seized) by court order.

Seized animals are commonly held at local animal shelters. The owners often surrender them to try to avoid animal cruelty charges. This surrender is important because once it happens; the shelter becomes the owner of the animals. As owners, they can take whatever action is appropriate in regards to the animals. Without a surrender agreement or court order, the animals are in limbo during the legal process. This can be financially, physically and emotionally exhausting to the shelter staff and their limited resources. In a broad generalization, the relatively healthy animals receive care. The severely diseased ones are humanely euthanized. Unfortunately, court proceedings can drag on for years. As "evidence", the animals used to be maintained by the shelter for the entire legal process. A more recent development is for the court to order owners to pay the boarding and medical bills for the animals while the neglect or abuse charges are pending. This is a huge expense, which forces owners to face the reality that they cannot afford to adequately maintain large numbers of animals. This, in turn, can help the shelter get the animals legally surrendered by the owner.

In my experience, a hoarders' collecting of animals continues whether the court ordered them to stop or not. Research indicates that without counseling and medication, one hundred percent of hoarders will acquire more animals than the number initially removed from their care, and do so within a few months. Hoarding usually continues until the hoarders' health fails, and they require supervised living situations.

Humane animal laws in Wisconsin are in place to prevent cruelty, abuse and neglect to animals. Every case of hoarding I have seen involved primarily neglect of the animals. Lack of medical attention and lack of sanitation topped the list. Hoarding cases that go to court usually result in fines, court orders to not own animals for 1-3 years(which are not very effect deterrents), and rarely, incarceration. What judge wants to put little old cat ladies in jail? In short, there are no easy solutions. These cases strain personal and community resources and are difficult to resolve. Honor the principles of Haws founders. Please do what you can to promote humane treatment for all animals. It can be as simple as supporting local animal shelters or as involved as creating more effective animal laws.