

NEW YORK CITY HOARDING TASK FORCE TRANSCRIPT

As Senior Director of Counseling Services at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), I am grateful to the New York City Hoarding Task Force for including the phenomenon of animal hoarding as they work to find effective, ethical and humane solutions for the problems created by human hoarding behavior. The urge to collect certain things is apparently a feature of human nature that many of us share to varying degrees. In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that several of my children called me recently to say “Mom, that could have been you!” They were referring to a recent news story describing the plight of a hoarder who was buried up to his neck for three days after his magazine collection fell on him.

Dr. Randy Frost has presented a comprehensive picture of human hoarding behavior. A person is defined as an animal hoarder when they succumb to the compulsion to own more animals than they can properly care for. Animal hoarding is not a matter of numbers; it is the quality of life for the animals that determines the diagnosis. The hoarding of inanimate objects often leads to pests, filth and the risk of fire. The hoarder, the neighbors and family members all may suffer the consequences. In animal hoarding there are additional victims, sometimes numbering in the hundreds,-- the animals themselves. When confronted, animal hoarders offer many rationalizations for the horrendous living conditions of the animals under their control. For example, they claim that any life is better than being put to death by animal control facilities. This is the usual fate for most of these stray and unsocialized animals.

Prevention is the key to solving the animal hoarding problem. Once an animal hoarder is identified, the ASPCA Cares Department joins forces with the Counseling Department, Humane Law Enforcement and other city agencies to address the issue. First, we have to find a humane disposition for the animals at hand. Equally important, is the task of building a relationship of trust with the animal hoarder to prevent future collecting of too many animals. The Jewish Association for Services for the Aging (JASA) has a wonderful program that assigns a social worker specialized in animal hoarding so that the needs of both the client and the animals can be addressed.

I will show two brief videotapes. The first one, ‘Rescue’ is a documentary by Peter Sutherland that focuses on a 50-year-old animal hoarder named George White in New York City. His parents were cat collectors. When they died, he inherited a small apartment filled with 119 cats. Eventually, he became homeless and continued to hoard cats in his van. After a car accident caused by the many cats in the van, he was assigned to the ASPCA Intervention Program for persons convicted of animal cruelty. We invited him to volunteer as a ‘cat socializer’. This is very meaningful work to him, and he has thus far resisted getting more cats of his own. He still picks up strays, but now he brings them to be spayed, neutered, and adopted. We are hoping that he will come to trust the ASPCA as an agency that cares as much as he does about the cat’s well being. Perhaps this will reduce the intensity of his obsession with cats.

(Video is shown)

Q. In the film we just viewed, there was another man, John, who had a lot of cats in his small apartment- do you consider John an animal hoarder?

Dr. LaFarge: No, John is not an animal hoarder because the animals are obviously not suffering. John is a man with a lot of clutter and way too many cats for the size of his apartment, but he manages to care for them. The diagnosis of animal hoarding depends on the condition of the animals. It is important to have a veterinarian or vet tech assess the animals to make the diagnosis.

Q. What is George's the motivation to rescue cats? Is it that he needs to have a large number of animals to care for?

Dr. LaFarge: No, it is not about the number of animals. His conscious priorities are rescue, survival and life itself for the cats. If he thinks a certain cat can find a better home, he will hand it over to a cat rescuer that he trusts. But if he thinks the animal is at risk of being humanely euthanized, he will hold on to it just to keep it alive. For George, it is the desperate plight of the stray cat that fuels his irrational urge to bring the cat into his home.

Q. Could you talk about how pet owners anthropomorphize their animals and think of them as children?

Dr. LaFarge: People normally project many different feelings and features on to their animals. Companion animals are bred to fulfill certain of our emotional needs. Pets are increasingly described as 'members of the family' and treated that way. This makes them vulnerable to abuse when the family is dysfunctional. Pets are like children in that they are completely dependent on an adult for all aspects of their well being. However people define the relationship, it is well documented that people derive both health and pleasure from the intimacy and physical contact with pets.

Q. Do people hoard cats more than dogs?

Dr. LaFarge: Yes, at least, in urban environments. That is because it is easier to keep multiple cats hidden from view. Cats do not bark. Also, they are more inclined to hide when strangers come and thus remain undetected.

Q. (partially audible) What is the role of the criminal justice system?

Dr. LaFarge: The courts and law enforcement do not like animal hoarding cases. Sometimes, when an animal hoarder is arrested, the Judge lets them go or even gives the animals back. It is very frustrating. The prosecutors have to prove that the animals are better off dead than continuing to live with the animal hoarder. The shelters do not like these cases because they do not have room for 30 new animals that are not immediately adoptable. An arrest, by itself, is not the solution. However, threatening the animal hoarder or her family with arrest may be useful as leverage. The answer is multiagency cooperation.

I will now show you a videotape by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) that graphically depicts the benefits of a multiagency approach to animal hoarders.
(Video is shown)

Animal hoarding is a biopsychosocial phenomenon. Biologically, a genetic predisposition to obsessive-compulsive disorder is probably a factor. Psychologically, the life story of most animal hoarders includes significant losses and failed attachments. Socially, local community and federally funded agencies have a crucial role to play. Animal hoarders do not steal their animals. The cats and dogs are usually ‘dumped’ by citizens who are avoiding their responsibility to find a better solution to their unwanted pet. People often say, “I don’t want to take my cat to the animal shelter – they will just kill her. I am going to take her to the ‘cat lady’ across town. At least, she won’t kill her.” But they never look inside this nice little old lady’s apartment to see the horrendous condition of the animals. This failure of the community to offer a safety net for stray and unwanted animals sets up vulnerable people to become animal hoarders.