

SOME THOUGHTS ON HOARDING FROM CAT CHAT'S "DEAR SALLY" AKA SALLY E. BAHNER

Do you know your neighbor?

The local cat lady may have a more deep-seated problem than just feeding neighborhood strays.

Incidents involving cats and dogs living in squalid conditions come to public attention all too often these days. And the public response is one of outrage coupled with a sense of helplessness in coping with the always-horrific conditions.

Within the past year...

- The house of a supposed rescuer in East Hampton, L.I., burns and reveals more than 100 animals of all kinds, many dead as a result of the fire
- More than 30 pit bulls were rescued from a so-called breeder in East Haven, Conn., where they were living in squalor
- 94 cats were found in a house in New Haven and less than a week later five dead dogs and six severely neglected dogs were discovered in Hamden
- More than 100 cats were rescued from a once stately home in Westbrook, Conn.

To those of us who share our hearts and homes with well cared for pets, the thought of living in such conditions is appalling. It is surely dismaying for rescuers and shelter personnel working hard to curb the population of stray and feral cats.

Often the hoarders live in their squalid world for years before a concerned neighbor or visitor detects foul odors emanating from the house. Authorities are called and the sad process of discovery leads the trapping of dozens of uncared for cats and dogs, the euthanasia of the sick ones and the attempt by already over-burdened shelters to find homes those whose lives can be salvaged.

Unfortunately what appears on the surface to be a case of blatant animal cruelty is more often an obsessive-compulsive disorder. The hoarder is likely to be a single, middle-aged woman with limited outside contacts. Because she has a reputation as a "cat lady," she may be enabled by well-intentioned people who dump off their unwanted strays and bags of food. And because the animals are not spayed or neutered, they quickly multiply and the end result is dozens, even hundreds of cats in a filthy and disease-ridden environment.

Tufts University professor Gary J. Patronek, VMD, Ph.D., wrote the landmark paper, "The Problem of Animal Hoarding," stating that hoarding is indeed a psychological problem rather than one that is confined to age, class, gender or economics. As with the woman from Westbrook who held a job and presented an outwardly normal appearance, Patronek found that many hoarders lead double lives.

Patronek found that 76 percent of collectors are female, and 46 percent are 60 years of age or older. Most are not married and more than half live alone. In almost 70 percent of the cases, the collectors lived in deplorable conditions with their living quarters soaked in urine and covered with feces, often without basic amenities. Sick and dead animals were found in 80 percent of reported cases, but most of the hoarders were unaware of the problem.

Men that were identified as hoarders collected dogs, while women collected cats.

The American Veterinarian Medical Association recognizes hoarding as a public health problem, stating that “veterinarians may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws or local ordinances. When these situations cannot be resolved through education, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities. Disclosures may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people.”

How can ordinary people help?

Don't overlook what could be dangerous, unhealthy conditions in your neighborhood. Call the police or humane officials if you see signs of neglect – skinny, unkempt cats going in and out of broken windows, a bad odor emanating from the area, rodent or insect infestations. Be persistent, especially since the rate of recidivism for animal hoarders is nearly 100 percent. Interveners must be willing to listen, understand the human-animal bond, and slowly work in conjunction with a team of social workers, medical doctors, veterinarians and humane society workers to gain the trust of the collector.

Unfortunately, authorities have their hands full with more serious offenders, so hoarders often receive a slap on the wrist and their animals taken away. And frequently they fall back into the same vicious cycle.

Legislation was enacted in Mansfield, Conn., that requires cats older than 6 months to be spayed or neutered. Violators could be fined \$90, although cat breeders are allowed to keep non-neutered cats and pay a \$75 annual fee. Rhode Island has passed similar legislation and ordinances are being considered in Colorado and New Jersey.

Such legislation could be hard to enforce since people may not be willing to admit the number of cats they house. Strays are often fed without claim to ownership, not to mention the disposable attitude of some owners who may just abandon their cats when forced to ante up.

That leaves watchful citizens and dedicated pet owners to sound the alarm when things don't seem right with that neighbor down the street. Sometimes responsible pet ownership goes beyond taking care of your own critters.

For more information

--www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding – the home page of Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium, which Includes detailed information along with guidelines for intervention, and a report by Jane N. Nathanson and HARC, “Animal Hoarding: Recommendations for Intervention by Family and Friends”

--<http://www.api4animals.org/articles?p=347&more=1cat=26> – Loving Animals to Death by Tina Perry, from Animal Issues, Animal Protection Institute, Summer 1999

--<http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/oct02/021015a.asp> – Animal Hoarding: A public health problem veterinarians can take a lead role in solving

--“Animal Hoarding: A Community Task Force Solution” is a 7-minute video available from the HSUS to help local animal control agencies and shelters reach beyond their organizations' walls to gain community-wide support in addressing this problem. The video represents various views on hoarding, including those of animal control officers, a mental health agency employee, and a fire department official. A companion brochure provides a comprehensive description and profile

of the typical animal hoarder; it also contains more specific information on the associated safety risks, legal considerations, benefits of team efforts among agencies, and a list of other resources. The video, along with the brochure is available for \$6. Call 202-452-1100 or order online at www.animalsheltering.org. (Source: Animal Sheltering Magazine website)