

The Horrors of Hoarding

By Roger Brigham

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This article was published on the Animal Legal Defense Fund website in 2005 as a sidebar to a story on a specific hoarding case.

At ALDF, we hear the stories almost daily.

- In Colorado, a distraught woman enters the hospital on a 72-hour suicide watch after humane workers remove 26 cats infected with ringworm from her feces-littered home. Relatives say they were unaware of a problem.
- In Pennsylvania, a man is charged with 46 counts of animal cruelty after officials remove 73 malnourished and dehydrated horses, ponies, cats, kittens and other animals – 5 years after he had been convicted of 24 counts of animal cruelty but was allowed to keep the animals.
- In Georgia, animal rescue workers enter a home and find 26 living cats – and 179 dead ones.

These are just three examples of what health professionals and law enforcement officials describe as “animal hoarding,” a widespread phenomenon that is the source of more and more animal cruelty cases every day. The health hazards to the animals can range from blindness (due to toxic ammonia in the air from excess urine) and skin ulcers, to debilitating emaciation, dehydration ... and cannibalism.

“Throughout the country, animal hoarders can be found in almost every community, large or small,” said Pamela Frasch, director of the Animal Legal Defense Fund’s Anti-Cruelty Division. “Hoarders endanger the health and lives of every living creature in their households, themselves included. The deplorable conditions only worsen as they move deeper into a state of denial and the communities around them turn a blind eye. The animals – sick, dying or dead – need help.”

Only recently have mental health workers, animal activists and law enforcement officials begun to understand animal hoarding. The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) says animal hoarding is identified as having these characteristics:

- Attempts to keep an abnormally large number of animals
- Inability to provide minimal nutrition, veterinary care, shelter or sanitation
- Neglect that often leads to illness, starvation, and death
- Failure to recognize the devastating impact of this neglect

Mental health workers say these hoarders are driven by a behavioral abnormality that makes it virtually impossible for them to give up animals for adoption. A second group of animal "collectors," operators of inhumanely cruel "animal mills," are driven by the prospect of profit, and they usually focus on specific species or popular breeds they believe they will be able to market.

In some instances, both profiles seem to fit.

The national database of animal cruelty cases in which criminal charges have been filed that ALDF compiles and maintains indicates that the phenomenon of animal mills and animal hoarding is widespread – and skyrocketing. While the number of animal cruelty cases in the ALDF database rose 30 percent from 2003 to 2004, in that same time the percentage of hoarding cases increased by almost 150 percent.

The burden on local shelters and rescue volunteers when attempts are made to shut down hoarders can be staggering.

For example, in New York's Fulton County, local organizations spent more than \$100,000 caring for 230 animals seized from James and Henrietta Fagan before criminal charges were even brought, and those charges were brought only after ALDF stepped in and applied public pressure with the District Attorney's office.

"One hoarding case involving a few hundred, or even a few dozen, animals can completely bankrupt a shelter," said Dana Campbell, senior attorney with ALDF's Anti-Cruelty Division. "Counties and shelters need to be proactive now in planning for large-scale seizures of animals by developing foster care networks, passing pre-conviction forfeiture and cost-of-care bond laws and procedures, and finding other ways that immediately shift the costs of caring for so many abused animals from the rescuers to the hoarders. The alternative – to leave these helpless creatures living in squalor with the hoarders – is repugnant and unacceptable."

The relatively low priority assigned by courts and prosecutors to animal neglect cases, coupled with the legal delays of the hoarders themselves, often drag out trials for months or even years, leaving the animals who have not been removed at continued risk. In Ulster County, N.Y., for instance, charges have been pending against Patty Abezis since November 2002, while more than 100 animals on her property wait for relief.

Despite the growing prevalence of animal hoarding cases, only Illinois includes a special definition for animal hoarding in its criminal statutes. The statute, signed into law in 2001, allows for courts to require psychological or psychiatric evaluation and treatment of convicted offenders above and beyond any other conditions allowed under the cruelty statutes.

The importance of having such a legal remedy is recognized by the mental health professionals of HARC and by animal law experts.

"Animal hoarding is a community problem," according to HARC. "It is cruel to animals, can devastate families, be associated with elder abuse, child abuse, and self-neglect, and be costly for municipalities to resolve. Without appropriate post-intervention treatment, recidivism approaches 100 percent. Increased awareness, leading to more comprehensive long-term interventions, is needed."

Hoarders can be difficult for prosecutors, judges, news media and often even veterinarians and the general public to recognize. Protesting their "love of animals" is usually the first line of defense offered by hoarders and it can be difficult for the uninitiated to see through.

"We all need to do what we can to educate prosecutors, judges and news reporters that hoarding is like alcoholism: an incurable addiction that means they must never have another drink – or in this case, another animal – because they can't stop with just one, and they fail to see the devastating damage caused by their addiction," Campbell said. "Communities need laws and judges willing to tell hoarders that they are prohibited from ever owning another animal. It's the surest way to prevent future animal cruelty."

Once hoarders or puppy mill operators are shut down, the next step they usually take is to relocate to another jurisdiction ... and establish another hell on earth.

"Unfortunately, unlike other crimes such as robbery or car theft," Campbell said, "police departments and local courts are not required to keep track of convicted hoarders, or any type of animal abuser, for state and federal crime data tracking purposes. That means that when a hoarder is finally caught, she or he can easily pick up and move to another state, as hoarders often do, and start over with a clean record as far as law enforcement is concerned. I would like to see the U.S. Justice Department start requiring local jurisdictions to include animal crimes as part of the statistics they must track."

Until law enforcement officers and prosecutors actively track and close down hoarders and puppy mills, huddled masses of animals will continue to suffer in the secret prisons in our midst.