

# How to Spot a Hoarder

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You remember Vicki Kittles, don't you?

Sweet gal. Ran into trouble with the law in Florida in the early 1980s after she was found holed up in her elderly mother's tiny house with more than 40 animals – including two horses – among disgusting piles of feces and dead animals. She took off while being tried on animal neglect charges and ran away from subsequent animal cruelty charges in Colorado and Washington before being found in an abandoned school bus in Oregon with 115 cats and a handful of other animals. After another protracted court trial, she was convicted of 42 misdemeanor counts of animal neglect and sat in jail for more than a year.

Then she took off again ... and settled in Wyoming, where officials brought her up on cruelty charges, taking 48 cats and six horses from her property.

Kittles' case is extreme, but it shows most of the tell-tale signs of an animal hoarder. Things prosecutors and courts should consider:

- *Recidivism.* Without legal and psychological intervention, nearly all hoarders continue to collect animals. That's why the explicit court ban preventing the Woodleys from possessing animals for five years (the maximum restriction allowed by law) is so important.

- *Poor health and living conditions.* The neglected victims of hoarders usually show obvious signs of distress – emaciation, parasites, dental rot and other illnesses – but do not get taken out of their filthy and chaotic environments to receive veterinary care. One veterinarian said the ammonia in the air inside the Woodley house tested at 40 ppm; by comparison, a pig barn tested at 2 ppm. A Lee County officer said he literally could not step into the Woodley house without landing in feces.

- *"Don't take my babies from me."* Most hoarders sincerely believe they are providing shelter for animals out of a love for their animals, and see themselves as being persecuted by cold-hearted busybodies. Many hoarders make sympathetic defendants, incapable of taking care of themselves or their relatives and living in virtual isolation. This can play on a court's sympathies. "We're not the type of people to mistreat or harm our animals. We've taken in animals that other people would rather shoot in the head or take to the canner, and we made them well," a defendant told the judge in a 1995 case in Washington. Yet the horses removed from the hoarder's care were emaciated, undernourished and inadequately sheltered. **Real** rescuers provide **real** shelter.

- *Do the math.* Taking care of an animal, whether a horse, a dog or a cat, is like raising a child. It takes time, money and effort to provide the food, care, cleaning and attention needed for a healthy existence. When one person raises three cats, that can show a loving heart. But if the number of animals seems unreasonable – it is.