

Animal Hoarding

[Adapted from "Animal Sheltering Magazine," July/August 1999] (Wisconsin House Rabbit News)

The compulsive collecting of animals is an under-recognized mental health problem. In 1999, House Rabbit Society chapters encountered rabbit hoarders in Minneapolis (>400 rabbits), Sacramento (>200 rabbits) and San Diego (>50 rabbits). Caring for the confiscated animals, which are often in poor health, places a huge, unexpected drain on limited rescuer resources.

Hoarders are often people with good intentions and love animals. They also can't say "no" to yet another animal they think needs to be rescued.

Hoarders often have mistaken beliefs about the care and fate of animals in shelters; they see themselves as the only person who cares. Afterward, the hoarder finds excuses not to adopt the animal out to a good home, and so the animal stays. Eventually, there are too many animals for the hoarder to care for. Animals fall ill and don't receive medical treatment; waste is not removed; and the animal's health is at risk, exactly the situation the hoarder thought s/he was preventing!

A survey published by researchers at Tufts University (1) found that collectors frequently see the "rescued" animals as surrogate children or love substitutes. They form excessive emotional attachments to the animals, and they have an abnormal need to control this emotional aspect of their lives. Even after the animals are confiscated, the hoarder often resumes her collecting behavior.

A review of cases found that three-quarters of hoarders are female; three-quarters are single, divorced or widowed; over half live alone; almost half are 60 or older and 37% are between 40 and 59 years. In 80% of cases, some animals were found dead or in severe condition, and in three-quarters of cases, the premises were unsanitary and overcrowded.



Some warning signs of hoarder behavior:

- the inability to refuse a "needy" animal, despite having too many at home
- a refusal to stop rescuing despite a lack of financial and housing resources
- the unwillingness to adopt the "rescued" animal to good homes, and finding excuses to reject applicants
- the inability to care for the animals, physically and emotionally
- having mistaken beliefs about the hoarded animals' needs, and about shelter alternatives
- avoiding behaviors that will expose the hoarder, such as inviting guests to the home

What distinguishes a rescuer from a hoarder? As rescuers, we know that we have limits. We can't rescue every animal, but we will help those we can. We know that an adoptive home is much better at providing the love and care that a companion animal needs. Moreover, placing a rabbit into a permanent home creates a space for rescuing another abandoned bunny. Hoarding doesn't solve the problem; it only creates a larger one for real rescuers at a later date.

Reference

1. Patronek G. "Hoarding of Animals: An Under-Recognized Public Health Problem in a Difficult-to-Study Population." Public Health Reports, Jan/Feb 1999.

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