

Opening the Closed Door

STRATEGIES
FOR COPING WITH
ANIMAL HOARDERS

By Carrie Allan

THE SUBJECT OF ANIMAL HOARDING invariably elicits more questions than answers. Where is the boundary between a compulsive hoarder and a normal, healthy person who simply has a lot of pets? Is it the compulsion or the condition of the animals that makes a hoarder? What's the magic number that shows someone has crossed the line?

What drives people to hoard objects and animals? How can someone live in the kind of conditions witnessed in hoarder households—impassable clutter, floors caked in animal feces, air too toxic to breathe without a mask—and not seem to notice or mind?

And most importantly, how should hoarders be handled by humane societies and animal care and control agencies? Is prosecution the answer? How can animal protection advocates achieve better results for the animals who are suffering right now inside the homes of people once thought of as eccentric-yet-benign “cat ladies”?

PHOTOS BY THOMAS MICHAEL CORCORAN

In the course of researching this story, *Animal Sheltering* spoke to humane investigators, shelter directors, animal control officers, social workers, and psychologists. All of their agencies and organizations have dealt with hoarders at one point or another; many feel they've had some success in developing operational strategies to address the problem.

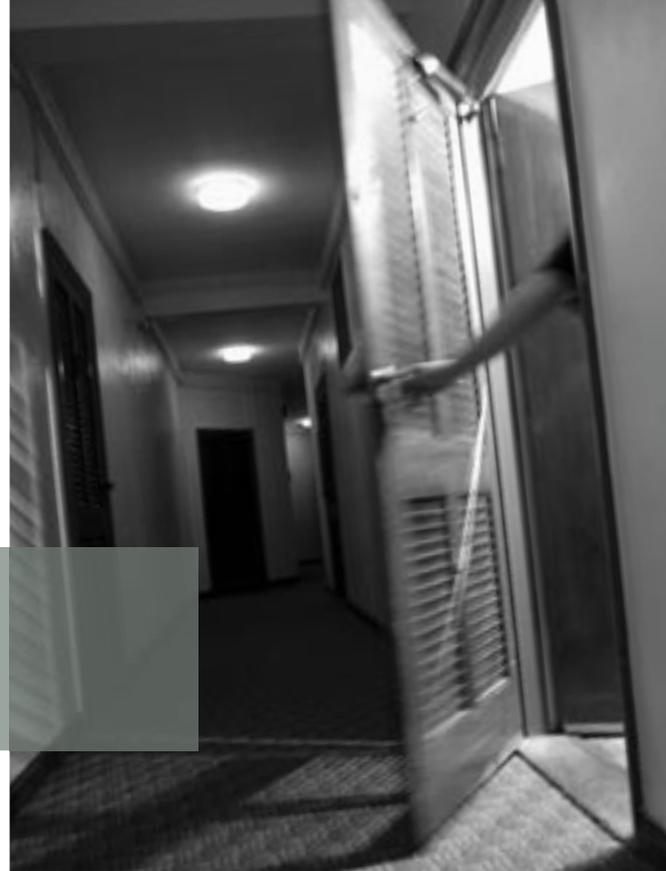
Many of the people who compulsively collect animals have the same skittishness, the same wildness and fear of people, that make feral cats so difficult to handle.

But they shared a universal frustration over the fact that hoarders—due to a combination of their difficult-to-treat psychological problems, their ability to change geographic location, and the often inadequate laws governing their punishment and psychological treatment—almost always start hoarding again. The recidivism rate for hoarders who are left to their own devices without continued counseling and oversight is frequently estimated to be around 100 percent.

Dave Garcia, vice president of operations and humane law enforcement at the SPCA of Texas in Dallas, has been in the field for 20 years and has investigated and assisted with scores of hoarding cases. Even though he's saved hundreds of animals from dreadful living conditions; even though he prepares intensively for cases and helps educate prosecutors and the media on the hoarding phenomenon; even though he's conducted classes at conferences and training schools on the national and regional levels, not once has he felt that he's gotten through to a hoarder on a level where he could see the light go on in her brain, he says. Not once has he felt certain he's stopped the behavior permanently.

One time, Garcia says, a couple with too many animals "saw us close down a [neighboring] hoarder, and the husband turned to the wife and said, 'Now do you understand?' And they called me, and I removed 36 dogs from their property." In that case, though, Garcia notes, it was not the investigators but a spouse who had a persuasive effect. "That's the only one," he says. "Everybody else, *everyone*, sees nothing wrong with what they're doing."

It's that blindness that makes hoarders so difficult to deal with. Many of the people who compulsively collect animals have the same skittishness, the same wildness and fear of people, that make feral cats so difficult to handle. As all field officers know, as many times as you explain to a feral cat that the trapping, vaccinations, and sterilization you're providing are for her own good, it takes a special



kind of coaxing and cautious, gentle handling to help her understand that what's being offered is help.

While good results have been obtained for individual sets of animals who have been the victims of a hoarder, what frequently happens after a prosecution is all too predictable: The hoarder waits a while, and then begins collecting animals again, one at a time—the stray cat who shows up on the back porch becomes three stray cats, who become six, who soon have free range of the home and often breed endlessly as the hoarder indulges her need to obtain or "save" as many as possible.

In some cases, meanwhile, the shelter that seized the first set of animals is suffering the financial and operational consequences of having taken in hundreds of animals in one swoop, an influx few organizations are prepared to handle on their own. Frequently, the animals seized in a hoarding case have gone without proper socialization or veterinary care for so long that they suffer from diseases and major behavior problems. These victimized animals often must be euthanized, and the shelter then suffers not only the financial and operational burdens, but new PR problems as the public asks, "How is euthanasia any improvement over what these animals were living with?"

Many of these operational difficulties can be avoided through better preparation; seizure and prosecution are not always the answer. But when they are the only option left, shelters can receive help in handling the costs of large seizures through good local laws. "Bonding" laws compel the perpetrator to help with costs of care; other civil citations allow an animal owner to be declared "unfit" to care properly for his animals. Civil "unfit" laws have a lower burden of proof than criminal cruelty proceedings,

and require, once the person has been declared unfit, that seized animals quickly become the legal property of the seizing agency; the animals can then be adopted or euthanized instead of languishing in a kennel as the criminal case proceeds through court. Though large-scale euthanasia of hoarded animals is not always necessary, it is sometimes the most humane course of action—and there's no substitute for pre-education of the public, the courts, and the media in trying to help critics understand the reasons behind your decisions.

As effective as some hoarder prosecutions have been, so little is known about the psychology behind hoarding that treatments for the compulsion are in their infancy. Hoarders are notoriously difficult to study, says Randy Frost, a professor of psychology at Smith College in Massachusetts who's been studying connections between the hoarding of inanimate possessions and the hoarding of animals.

"The problem," says Frost, "is that when they get identified it's in the context of a very adversarial relationship. So the Massachusetts SPCA has come in or the health department has come in and taken the animals away, and so anyone connected with any kind of authority is looked on with distrust. So getting people at that point to talk to us is very difficult."

Because animal hoarding remains such a mystery, solutions to the problem have often involved treating the symptoms rather than the underlying illness. But many people are trying to change that. The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC)—of which Frost is a member—was formed in 1997 as part of an ongoing attempt to begin treating the sickness of hoarding itself through an interdisciplinary approach; HARC members include animal protection professionals as well as people from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, social work, epidemiology, and veterinary medicine.

Along with preliminary attempts to address underlying causes of and treatment for hoarding behavior, HARC has also sought better definitions. In a 2002 report titled "Animal Hoarding: Recommendations for Intervention by Family and Friends," Jane Nathanson of HARC defined a hoarder this way: someone who accumulates a large number of animals; fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care; fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation, and even death) or the environment (severely overcrowded and unsanitary conditions); and fails to act on or recognize the negative impact of the collection on their own health and well-being.

The research conducted through HARC is a

hopeful sign for those seeking to imbue the practical, hands-on work of public and private animal care and control agencies with a fuller understanding of what drives people to start collecting. Animal protection groups are developing more sophisticated and finely honed tools in their approaches to hoarders, using their connections with non-animal groups to get better results and try to end the cycle of recidivism.

Hoarding is unlike other kinds of animal abuse in one significant way: Most hoarders do not intend to harm their animals. The issue of intent can make or break a court case, and largely due to this lack of intent, hoarding often requires a less punitive and more people-friendly approach, one that employs more informational and practical resources than a single animal-focused agency can provide.

"[A hoarding case] truly is a cruelty case," says Belinda Lewis, director of Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "And the animals are the victims of cruelty and neglect. But there are extenuating circumstances in many of the hoarders' cases, and we can't show intent. So if we don't have intent, then potentially we have a human victim. And if we have a human victim who is in need of services and intervention and follow-up afterwards, then if we don't provide that intervention at the same time we intervene on behalf of the animal, then we're just going to have the cycle repeat, repeat, repeat."

The more shelters understand the psychological issues associated with hoarders and the most effective strategies for combating it, the more success they're likely to have in helping both people and animals. To understand hoarders better is not to forgive what they do. It is simply better than the alternative, which is not to understand—and which invariably leads to more of the same.

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Navigating the Clutter of Houses and Minds:

OF ALL THE HORRIFYING THINGS that animal protection professionals see in the course of their careers—deliberate sadistic abuse, animals who've been used for fighting, cats who've become the victims of domestic violence, dogs who've been neglected to the point of starvation or who've been left to live out their lives on the end of a chain, unloved and unnoticed—hoarding cases may be the most disturbing.

Everyone who's worked a case where large numbers of animals have been confined without proper veterinary care or sanitation can speak of the things they remember: the clutter; the mangy, flea-ridden, wheezing animals; the feces and corpses ground into the rug; the blackened ground that turns out to be made up of living and dead flies; and most of all, the hideous, sickening smell that gets into your clothes and hair and memory and seems like it will never come out again.

But none of the homes that have become unlivable, none of the groups of animals suffering in circumstances of terrible overcrowding and neglect, none of the people inhabiting fortresses of filth and clutter—none of them started out that way. At some point a line was crossed; at some point things went from under control to out of it. "The fact of the matter is anyone, in my opinion, can become a hoarder," says Dave Garcia, vice president of operations and humane law enforcement at the SPCA of Texas in Dallas. "When that person is in this house, this beautiful home, and they've got one cat, then they get another one, and then they have five and then they have ten, the care diminishes in such minute increments that the person justifies it in their own mind."

When he lectures shelters and police about coping with hoarders, Garcia frequently starts by going to the door of the room and putting a single piece of paper in front of the door—a tiny thing. But, as he points out, if you put a single piece of paper in front of the door every day for a year, there will come a point when you can no longer open the door. "That's how slowly and methodically it happens," Garcia says. "It's not like someone woke up and said, 'Hey, I'm going to get 200 dogs.'"

And at its core, the urge to save things is not a bad one, points out Randy Frost, a member of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) and a professor of psychology at Smith College in Massachusetts. "There's a sense of responsibility here that in some ways is a positive thing," Frost says. "We live in a society that throws away things that are still usable. Many times people with

hoarding problems feel so hyper-responsible about this that they end up saving everything. ... They feel a sense of moral duty to protect it and not be wasteful."

It's that fine line, where a positive urge leads to terribly negative consequences, that is probably the most disturbing aspect of hoarding: the psychological blindness of hoarders, their sheer inability to see the reality of what they are doing and how they are living. Generally speaking, hoarders do not intend to be cruel, and yet the condition of the animals they keep is sometimes worse—and on a larger scale—than those hurt by the most deliberate kind of abusers.

This gap between what's intended and what's achieved would be disturbing to most people, a sign of how badly humans can miss what we're aiming for. Yet it may be particularly disturbing to shelter folks, and not only because they're especially attuned to animal abuse. Most hoarders are the victims of their own psychology, a psychology that could be described as a dark, extreme side of a sheltering personality. Many of the urges that drive animal protection workers—to care for animals, to save their lives, to encourage others not to see them as easily discarded objects—drive hoarders as well, and the contempt for people that many shelter personnel struggle to overcome is much like the fear many hoarders feel. In a 2002 interview with the *Adult Abuse Review*, Jane Nathanson, a licensed clinical social worker working with HARC, explained how hard it has been to get a particular hoarder to trust her. "I've been working with one woman for over two years," she said, "and to this day, I can't count on her trust of me. These are very wounded people. Remember that having been hurt is one of the forces driving some people to gravitate to the world of animals, above and beyond the world of humans."

Nathanson went on to note that "these are people who consider themselves, in many cases, as having a very strong humane orientation. It comes to many of them as a shock that they are facing charges of neglect. ... [T]here is so much interaction [between animals and humans] that is so intensely pleasurable, sometimes people have to make the distinction between whether they are doing it for the animals or doing it for themselves."

The ability to make that distinction separates hoarders from people who truly have the best interests of the animals at heart and are able to make their welfare the top priority. But the gap between "us" and "them" is not as large as we would like to think, as anyone who's helped investigate a hoarder disguised as a shelter or rescue can

When Perpetrators Are Victims

attest. A key difference lies not only in a person's ability to follow through on her desire to help animals, but in the degree of compulsion: Hoarders feel unable to stop collecting, no matter how detrimental it is to their own circumstances or those of the animals.

In the past, the factors that caused a person to become a hoarder were thought to be linked to material deprivation in childhood, but recent research has found that that's not the case. As a HARC member who's long been studying the hoarding of possessions, Frost says that hoarding is more likely to be linked to a tumultuous childhood in a highly chaotic household where rules weren't always made clear and bonds with parents or guardians seemed extremely tenuous.

Many schizophrenics become hoarders; other hoarders are elderly, isolated people experiencing various stages of dementia. Many of them are no more capable of caring for themselves than they are of caring for hundreds of animals. The neglect of the animals in hoarder houses is usually echoed by self-neglect.

While animal hoarding research is still a relatively new field of study, other characteristics of the phenomenon are now being suggested. Frost and others have noted that part of what seems to drive many animal hoarders is a nesting instinct: They create a home they feel is safe, where they are surrounded by unquestioning, uncritical love. At times, Frost says, it becomes almost a melding of identities. "Sometimes we see an environment where the people live like animals: 'This animal is on an equal par with me, so they can decide the rules of the house, and I don't take control over them or make them go outside.'"

Within that nest—regardless of the often unsanitary, cluttered living conditions that are readily apparent to outsiders—the hoarder feels protected. When Frost interviews hoarders in their own homes, they don't notice the dirt and the clutter and the smell, he says. But interestingly, their reactions change once they've left the setting. "We'll take pictures of the house and show them to hoarders later, in the office, and they have this startling reaction of, 'Oh my god, I live like that?'" he says.

Compulsive hoarding is a psychological disorder, and those involved in trying to help the animals who've fallen victim to a hoarder should know as much as possible about the illness. Because it is a sickness, and because of the way that hoarders' lack of intent can be perceived by



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the courts, the media, and the public, the idea that hoarders should always be prosecuted under cruelty laws just doesn't make sense. The more understanding and empathy an investigator can demonstrate in his approach, the more likely he'll be to make a real difference—both to the animals and to the person who is suffering the effects of his own delusions.

The fact that hoarders are causing themselves great misery, the fact that they're victims of their own psychological problems, should generate sympathy from animal care and control workers. But illness does not, finally, excuse behavior: We may feel great pity for people suffering from addictions, diseases, or chemical imbalances that cause them to behave self-destructively—but in the case of animal hoarding, there are other victims, the victims for whom animal protection agencies are primarily responsible.

"It is entirely possible that someone has a variety of personality or psychological disorders in these cases," says Gary Patronek, VMD, founder of HARC. "But because those conditions are present does not mean they'll be absolved from any kind of liability for what they've done."

When confronting hoarding cases, Patronek says, humane workers should keep in mind that while many hoarders have similar psychological issues, research is increasingly showing that there is no single model of hoarding psychology. Hoarders are still individuals, and there are differences in motivations, in types of pathology, in the extent of their delusions, and in their willingness and even capacity to understand what they're doing wrong and how it can be remedied.

"If it's a one-size-fits-all rubber stamp kind of approach, then it's probably not going to be as effective as a more nuanced approach," Patronek says. "Prosecution will be the primary tool in some cases, and in other cases it may be [something else]. ... If you're working with Adult Protective Services and you have an elderly person who is doing this, and they're not evil or malicious and they're just a little bit out of it, perhaps ... Adult Protective Services may not want to work with you if they think you're going to prosecute this person and throw them in jail or fine them. That's where recognizing the nuances of different situations can help you craft the right kind of alliances and the right kind of solutions."

Hoarders come in all shapes and sizes; the disorder seems, unfortunately, to be constantly mutating. From the stereotypical old lady with too many cats, to the man breeding and selling dogs out of his home, to the couple feeding roadkill to a house full of ducks and raccoons,



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to the hoarder whose property contained dogs, parrots, goats, emus, and livestock, hoarders are branching out.

A recent case Garcia handled involved a hoarder calling herself a no-kill shelter; the group even had a board of directors that was supposedly overseeing organizational operations. It didn't matter, Garcia explained to law enforcement officials: What finally determines a course of action—and what shelters should inform the public, the media, and the courts about—is the condition of the animals. It's the large numbers and poor conditions of the animals that is the common link among different kinds of hoarders.

For many hoarders, the home they've created with their animals feels like the only place of safety—and if the hoarder is elderly, if they have few friends or family, the situation can be exacerbated by their isolation. Not only will the hoarder not receive the helpful nudges that can be provided by a loving friend or family member saying, *Hey,*



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I think you've got a problem, but without a human safety net, the world the hoarder has created with her animals becomes more and more important for her to protect. The less contact a hoarder has with the outside world and with the other people who inhabit it, the easier it becomes to slip into the fantasy one she has created.

To handle these hoarding cases in a way that may decrease the terribly high recidivism rate, Frost says, it's necessary to develop mechanisms to bring the hoarder back into contact with people who can care for and support her. Even keeping a recovering hoarder in contact with animals—in a controlled environment—can be helpful, he says, citing a case still developing at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in New York City.

In that case, the ASPCA has allowed a former cat hoarder to assist with cat care in the shelter. Stephanie LaFarge, senior director of counseling services at the organization, says that some staff were worried when she first suggested it, fearing that the man might mistreat the cats or try to remove them from the facility. But that hasn't happened, and LaFarge says she doesn't expect it to. So far, she says, the rewards are outweighing the risks: The man enjoys the work, is good at it, and hasn't started collecting more animals.

"The fact is most hoarders are not physically violent; they're not going to steal a cat and run out the door ..." she says. "The biggest problem that we have is that once a person is coming into your shelter and, let's say, working with your cats—and usually they can handle cats very, very well—then the problem arises if the cat has to be euthanized. I've never had trouble when a cat needs to be adopted. ... The problem is that [hoarders] seem to be obsessed with avoiding death. That's their rationale—anything is better than death." But, she points out, many shelters have similar problems with their own staff and volunteers.

LaFarge compares allowing hoarders to play a role in an animal shelter to sending an alcoholic to an AA meeting. The person can be around people who have similar interests but are channeling those interests into something positive and setting a good example for a

recovering hoarder.

It can be over-stimulating for someone with a collector's psychology, LaFarge acknowledges. "But basically life is stressful, and we get through stress by connecting with other people and having a support system. ... It is true that going to the shelter and seeing all these cats that you can't take home and you can't fix ... is stressful, but the alternative is for that person to be alone, at home, going out on the street and doing it again."

Trying to give people who've screwed up an opportunity to come around to a more humane way of living and thinking and seeing takes work and understanding on the part of shelter staff, LaFarge says. "I think it just depends on the comfort level of these people in the shelter, and maybe it would be just one or two people who say, 'I'm willing to spend time talking to this person,' on the theory that it prevents relapse and worse trouble."

A significant portion of the interaction between a hoarder and the representative of a humane organization—whether that representative is a counselor like LaFarge or an ACO or a cruelty investigator—should involve gentle, compassionate, persuasive conversation. Hoarders often are so lonely, so desperate for contact, that in order to get them to hear any of the messages about animal care that shelter workers want them to understand, staff have to reciprocate by listening. "I was with a hoarder yesterday," says LaFarge, "and she brings in these pictures of all these cats in labor and their kittens and I had to spend probably an hour looking at the pictures of these cats—and it's horrible. But I have to do that because that is her way of connecting."

Sometimes the initial visit from an animal control officer is the first human contact a hoarder has had in months—and the tone of that meeting can shape everything that follows. Investigators who understand the complex psychological issues that hoarders are coping with always start out with a gentle approach because it's likely to be the most effective.

Hoarders are apt to be suspicious, says Dave Pauli, director of The HSUS Northern Rockies Regional Office, and will try to fit you into one of three possible roles: a

biased authoritarian who's against them from the start, a neutral figure, or a resource. "If you can make yourself be that resource and let them know that you're not interested in taking their animals and destroying them, that you are trying to give them some alternatives so it doesn't reach that point," says Pauli, "many of them will respond in a positive way."

That initial approach can drive the ongoing relationship forward, says Suzi Hansen, an HSUS program coordinator who works with Pauli. Hansen always tries to approach a suspected hoarder with an olive branch firmly in hand. "You need to learn who the collector is, get some kind of profile," Hansen says. "When I first approach, I come over, get to know who they are, who is living in the household—both humans and animals—and get a sense of what the situation is. A lot of the time when you establish a relationship with that person and you establish your credibility as this positive person, they will come around and they will start working with you."

Hansen has seen that reaction firsthand. Her recommendations on food, housing, care, and other improvements have sometimes been received with gratitude—and she has even been able to talk hoarders into giving up some of their animals. "It's amazing when the animal owner will say to you, 'Oh, my cats are using their litter boxes now and this and this is happening,' seeing the results as their population decreases," Hansen says. "And then they start getting it. The light suddenly goes on, and then sometimes they're like, 'Can you take these ten today, please?'"

Working with hoarders to help them improve the conditions their animals are living in or reduce the numbers of the animals they're keeping is often a long-term project, and one that can try the patience of humane workers who see all too clearly the inadequacies of the way the perpetrator's animals are being cared for.

But it's necessary for those who want to treat the disease rather than the superficial symptoms—and it's also

necessary to developing a sound, well-documented body of evidence in those all too common cases where treatment simply doesn't work. An investigator who approaches a hoarder to offer help should document every interaction he has with the person—every piece of advice given, everything he observes about the condition of the animals and their keeping, and all the ways those things change over time. If it becomes clear that the animals' condition has worsened, and that a particular hoarder is simply unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes, the agency has a long, documented history of the help it's tried to provide.

That's the way Kyle Held, a former vet tech and now a statewide investigator at the Humane Society of Missouri in St. Louis, tries to approach hoarders in his area. When hoarders get a visit from him, Held says, "I guess the initial feeling is fear, but I'd like to think that by the time I leave most of the time, they're pretty comfortable with me coming back and doing re-checks and doing more recommendations and stuff like that."

Held's medical background helps him discern not only what the animals need but how long their conditions have existed. He knows the time it takes for a wound to scab over and a scar to form, so when he finds a dog with a wound that hasn't been treated, he's able to determine the severity of the neglect. "And definitely that's a determination of how mad I'm going to be," Held says, "because I know if that wound happened in the past few days or a month ago. It's definitely going to change my perspective on the deal."

A case that Held has been handling for several years involved a woman who had about 20 dogs when he first made contact. She claimed she wanted to operate an animal shelter, so Held took her at her word and approached her with practical tips on how to run a better shelter through improved animal care and adoptions.

The relationship was time-consuming and tried his patience enormously, Held says. "This lady was so adamant about helping animals, but every time we'd open her front door she'd have them tied to every piece of furniture in the house." Held would tell her, "You can't



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your neck stand up and just know that the gentle approach isn't going to work. "When you ask them to do something and you see the look in their eyes, you can often tell if this is going to get done," says Held. "If they don't let you finish a sentence before they start in on an excuse, then you know it's not going to work out for the best. The people who really want to listen and learn will sit there and listen to your recommendations before they even say anything."

"You make recommendations, you watch the situation develop, you offer counseling and assistance," says Kate Pullen. "You hope they'll accept the help, but at the same time you're building your case for later in case it becomes necessary to prosecute and seize the animals."

Local laws and the attitude of the hoarder help govern agency decisions about how to deal with the problems; sometimes the only way to get a person to accept help is by prosecuting him. In the end, it's the condition of the animals that determines what to do with a hoarder: Garcia says he once handled a case where a hoarder had five cats who were in such bad condition they had to be seized. He's also worked a case where a couple had 300 cats, but the cats were still healthy enough and the couple was doing enough for them, so Garcia had to tell the law enforcement team to back off.

"I had to tell them, 'If you take this case now you're going to lose it,'" he says. "[The hoarders] were caring for the animals ... they had clean food and water. There were filled litter boxes, but I also saw bags upon bags of litter that they had cleaned that morning. ... I also found and saw receipts from their veterinarian for medicine, so I said, 'Personally, I don't like the way they're housed, so I'm going to make recommendations on that. ... If they fail to follow those recommendations, then they're willfully neglecting the animals.' That's called building your case."

And that's what must be done with many hoarding investigations, says Kate Pullen, director of Animal Sheltering Issues at The HSUS: You often have to wait until the situation is bad enough, until it's ripe enough, to take legal action—and in the meantime, try to make sure it doesn't get to that point by offering the hoarder help in the form of resources and information.

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have that dog tied up that way," and she would follow his instructions—but then when he would come back later to check up on her, she would have a different dog tied up the same way, and then he'd have to be more specific: "OK, what I meant is you can't have *any* dog tied up that way." Though having to be so specific was annoying, Held says, the woman did make attempts to follow his recommendations, and his gentle approach helped gain him repeated, hospitable access to the home in order to track the situation.

But after several years of assistance, when he observed that the dogs were declining in health and that the woman continued to get more of them—she was up to 59 dogs and their overall condition had worsened—Held finally served a search warrant and seized the dogs.

He now has a long and well-documented file on how the humane society tried to help and how the woman failed to follow the recommendations of a helpful humane investigator with a veterinary background. In Held's cases as in many others, the decision to prosecute is a matter of using your judgment—not just about the condition of the animals, but about how competent and willing the hoarder is to make improvements.

Sometimes, says Held, you feel the hairs on the back of

Many Strategies, Many Partners: Developing

YOU'RE AT THE DOOR OF THE HOUSE the caller mentioned. You knock, but the owner doesn't appear to be home.

But through the window, you can see scores of cats slinking around in the shadows and hear others crying from other rooms. You can also see a few cat-shaped forms that don't appear to be moving, and you fear the worst.

The ammonia smell is overwhelming. The rug has vanished under piles of feces and old newspapers and other bits of human clutter, and there you are: You've come because a neighbor complained that a few cats from next door have been getting into her garden, but now you see that the situation is beyond anything you had prepared for. There are probably hundreds of sick and dying animals in that house, and you'll need more space and transport vehicles and lots of human help and lots of specific equipment—gloves, cages, gas masks—and your shelter is already bursting at the seams from the spring cat influx and a local activist group has been hollering about high euthanasia rates and this is just going to make it worse and the owner is going to be furious and maybe a little nuts—

STOP. REWIND.

A single shelter should not have to handle a hoarder alone. To ensure better results for both animals and people involved in hoarding cases, humane organizations need to form partnerships—not just with other animal organizations that can pool resources, labor, and space but also with groups that can address the non-animal concerns.

Go back beyond the morning, beyond the week, beyond the month. In fact, rewind back several years.

It doesn't have to be this way.

In fact, it should never be this way: A single shelter should not have to handle a hoarder alone. To ensure better results for both animals and people involved in hoarding cases, humane organizations need to form partnerships—not just with other animal organizations that can pool resources, labor, and space but also with groups that can address the non-animal concerns. “If you look at human hoarding behavior, the communities that are approaching this the most proactively are establishing

task forces,” says Patronek. “[They're creating] multi-disciplinary teams of all relevant people, so that prior to a case everybody knows each other and all the players have a working relationship, and when a case does come up the right mix of people can be pulled together very quickly for maximum effect.”

What's more, if the collaborative relationships are started early and given time to develop, hoarding cases will rarely reach the scale described above; developing task forces and partnerships can provide animal control agencies and humane organizations with more resources to intervene earlier—before the situation gets out of control, before the hoarder has completely lost touch with reality, before so many animals are suffering.

Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control's involvement in a hoarding task force since the late 1980s has had a profound effect on the agency's handling of both kinds of hoarding cases: those that intervention can alleviate and those that are already too far gone and require more drastic measures.

When Belinda Lewis took over the agency, the director of the local adult protective services agency approached her about hoarding. The woman was distressed and frustrated about the problems she'd seen; she felt the animal care and control agency hadn't been doing enough to address them because it feared the media coverage would portray the shelter as strong-arming the nice little old cat lady and taking away all her animals.

“And my response was: ‘You're absolutely right, we need to address these issues, but I can't address them without your help. And what you're telling me is that

you can't address them without my help,’” says Lewis. “So I said, ‘Instead of knocking down doors right now, let's sit down and figure out exactly what we're going to do.’”

It was the beginning of a collaboration between animal care and control and various other agencies and departments that hold solutions to pieces of the hoarding puzzle. Because seizing the animals only addresses a symptom of the problem, it's not likely to create long-term improvements—so Lewis and her agency have developed a more systematic approach designed to address the needs of the hoarder as well as the animals.

You have to sit down together early, Lewis says, so that

Task Forces for Coping with Hoarders

when a situation arises, everyone understands the roles of each agency. In Fort Wayne, adult protective services, animal care and control, neighborhood code enforcement, and the health department are all involved in the task force. In this way, not only the conditions of the animals but the conditions of the home and the owner—which may be just as bad or even worse—are attended to by the agencies and organizations most prepared to help.

This multi-tiered approach can produce better results after a hoarder intervention. But it also helps ensure that hoarding situations don't spiral out of control; cases are usually still in their early stages when the coalition gets involved. In Fort Wayne, the collaboration among agencies has resulted in a heightened level of awareness about hoarding, and the publicity associated with hoarding cases over the past decade has benefited all agencies involved. Every time Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control deals with a hoarding case, employees use the opportunity to educate the media and the public about what hoarding is, what different agencies are doing about it, and why some of the animals might have to be euthanized.

"So the interventions are sooner now," says Lewis. "Neighborhood code enforcement recognizes it right away—they're going to call us. The board of health is going to call us. Someone is going to become aware and know who needs to be called, and as soon as one of the key agencies gets called ... we're going to get pulled into it. And if we get it first, we're going to pull them into it."

Once all the players are ready to go and comfortable in their roles, it becomes easier to plan on the fly when specific cases come up, Lewis says. Sometimes neighborhood code enforcement has to have the house condemned. Sometimes the mental health department needs to commit the suspect for a period of evaluation. And all these things in turn influence what animal care and control has to plan for in terms of care and disposition of the animals; these decisions can't be made in a vacuum. All aspects of a hoarder's problem—the psychological issues, the sanitation issues, the animal care issues, the human health issues—are connected to each other, and the cure has to be just as holistic as the disease.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, a coalition of agencies formed in 1998 after two major cases brought hoarding to the forefront of public attention: One home full of clutter burned down, causing six deaths, and that same year, a family had to be removed from a home because of major code violations. In both cases, the situations



required the intervention of several unconnected agencies—and yet each agency acted independently, resulting in a response that was less systematic and cohesive than the county would have liked.

Thus the Residential Hoarding Taskforce was started. But, says Andrew Sanderson, an animal control supervisor with the Fairfax County Police Department, animal control wasn't even included in the initial group. "It was the health department, the fire department, and then they used county services to incorporate other things—child protective services, adult protective services, waste disposal," Sanderson says. "How we got involved is because many of these hoarding cases ended up representing animals or having animals in the same house with people who were trash collectors." Hoarders who don't limit themselves to one kind of object/collection are very common, Sanderson says—yet another reason for any response team to have

the capacity to cope with many different physical, medical, sanitary, and psychological elements.

Because of the collective efforts, the county's response to hoarding cases is more methodical. And with the various health and safety departments at their backs, Sanderson and the other animal control officers have more ways to get into an animal hoarder's home and more ways to compel a hoarder to make necessary changes.

If Sanderson can't get a hoarder to accept help, and if the animals' conditions aren't bad enough to charge their caretakers with cruelty, other task force members can use their authority to try to make change. The fire department can cite a hoarder for fire code violations; the health department can focus on disease issues. If the case involves dogs, the zoning board can step in to force change as well; the county has a rule about how many dogs someone can have per square foot of land.

Having all the needed players briefed and ready to go

Everybody Plays a Part: Key Partners in an Eff

PROPER HANDLING of a hoarding case requires more than just appropriate care of the animals. Before a bust, different agencies may be able to enter homes inaccessible to animal control. Afterwards, the hoarder may need psychological and medical treatment; the house may need to be cleaned or even condemned. Here's a list of departments, organizations, and agencies that should be included in a hoarding task force.

■ **Other public and private animal care, protection, and control agencies** can assist with resources and staff and provide transport and housing in cases that require it.

■ **Adult protective services/senior care groups** have expertise in dealing with the additional problems that older pet owners may have, whether these are mental (encroaching Alzheimer's or dementia), physical (illness, lack of mobility), or social (isolation, lack of family support). "Not all hoarders are elderly," says Stephanie LaFarge of the ASPCA. "But that's when a lot of them get into trouble because they're not as able to handle the problems."

■ **Mental health agencies, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other therapists** can provide the psychological background to help understand the underlying problems and motivations of individual hoarders; they can also foster relationships that may lessen the urge to collect animals. Medication has been known to help in some cases; therapy can help in others. In a 2002 interview with *Adult Abuse Review*, licensed clinical social worker Jane Nathanson pointed out the importance of working with a therapist who understands the problem: "Let's say you've worked a really long time to get this person medically and psychiatrically evaluated—when they agree to go, that's a huge leap you've taken! [But] unless the therapist takes that human/animal linkage into account—if, for instance, that therapist seems to talk to them like they've got a collection of inanimate objects—they're not going to make progress." Being privy to the discussions and planning done by a larger coalition on hoarding can help mental health professionals design effective treatments.

■ **Veterinarians** can provide crucial exper-

tise about the condition of the animals in a hoarder home; they can recognize long-standing wounds and illnesses and can determine the severity of the animals' conditions. Should seizure and prosecution prove necessary, veterinarians will provide the testimony that can make or break a case. And vets in private practice can occasionally recognize a client who's slipping into hoarder territory, enabling them to provide advice and intervention before the situation worsens.

■ **Neighborhood code enforcement officials** can often obtain a warrant more easily than animal control if the condition of the hoarder's home or property violates local regulations or interferes with neighboring residences; animal control can then go in after the code enforcement folks have entered the house. If animals are in questionable condition but not in bad enough shape to warrant cruelty charges, neighborhood code enforcement can be a powerful ally in providing another way of approaching the problem, says Dave Holden, special agent with the Rhode Island SPCA in Riverside. "We can bring in the minimum housing [code] or the zoning official