

On the Positive Side: Communities should be aware of animal hoarding signs

By Judy Long / For the Sun-News

Posted: 08/14/2010 10:20:58 PM MDT

In recent times, Las Cruces has seen several animal hoarding cases brought into public view. At first glance, these seem like monstrous aberrations far removed from the situations of our own well-cared-for pets. But there is a connection. Animal hoarding is animal loving gone astray.

The criteria used to define animal hoarders:*

- They have more than the usual number of companion animals
- They are not providing even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care
- They are in denial about the inadequacy of their animal care. They resist any communication about negative impact on their animals, the physical state of the dwelling and the disruption of human relationships.*

Common signs of an incipient animal hoarder are deteriorating conditions and denial or lack of insight that there is a problem. Like so many animal welfare issues, recognition of the problem requires moving from the individual focus to the community level. Animal hoarders do not make this mental transition.

For the most part, animal hoarding cases involve households that are well-insulated from public view. Hoarders fiercely defend their independence; their home is their castle. In a shocking development, animal control officers invade their "fortress." By the time the cameras and the journalists come on board, what the audience sees are horrifyingly sordid scenes. The householder seems dazed; her or his reality has been breached with shocking suddenness. Those who figure in these scenes are often isolated. Their houses have long since passed beyond presentable; no-one comes through their front door, maybe hasn't for years. As with other hoarders, their cache has taken over. Rooms that once had specific functions have gone under. The animals have overrun areas that humans used to dedicate to specific functions: kitchen, bathroom, living room. The house is in bad shape; the owner has abandoned normal cleaning and maintenance.

Stoical animal control personnel wade in. They anticipate the fetid and possibly toxic conditions of the house and grounds. They are equipped with protective masks and they're wearing boots, prepared to find feces and urine inches deep and carcasses of dead cats. They bring implements and cages for the removal of the animals, which are now doomed. Many of them will be malnourished or sick; very few will be adoptable.

A representative case is reported by the ASPCA in a recent electronic report.** ASPCA humane law enforcement agents arrived to find an apartment overrun with cats and kittens. They were severely malnourished, and many suffered from upper respiratory disease. The floor was covered in several inches of feces and urine; no litter boxes were found. Presiding over this scene was an 85-year-old woman who was suffering from dementia and had been hoarding animals for years.

This case illustrates the two-pronged nature of animal hoarding: Mental problems of hoarders lead to abusive situations for the animal victims.

Academic experts are beginning to theorize about the dynamics of animal hoarding. Early research pointed toward a variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but new studies and theories are leaning toward attachment disorders in conjunction with personality disorders, paranoia, delusional thinking, depression and other mental illnesses. Some animal hoarders begin collecting after a traumatic event or loss, while others see themselves as "rescuers" who save animals from a life - or death - on the street.

According to an Animal Planet consultant, 75 percent of animal hoarders are women. Caring and rescuing, feeding and protecting fit well with women's socialization as caregivers. In addition, these individuals are lonely; relationships

with other humans have been cut off. Bonding with animals has become their primary emotional exchange and interaction.

Communities are beginning to recognize animal hoarding as a social issue, not just an individual eccentricity. Moving against animal hoarding involves human mental health as well as animal welfare. Public health and public safety become concerns in some cases.

Before the transformation from animal lover to animal hoarder is complete, there is a role for neighbors or relatives to intervene. If you know someone with an oversized menagerie, go ahead and be nosy. Ask if their animals are spayed/neutered. Check out nutrition and sanitation. Ask if she/he needs help. Beyond that, it is time to call in law enforcement.

*A fuller definition and reports of research can be found at <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/index.html>

** Source: ASPCA News Alert dated Aug. 6, 2010, at the ASPCA website@aspca.org

Dr. Judy Long is a retired professor of sociology and longtime animal lover.