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## Who Will Care for Your Pets?

by Sheila Webster Boneham, Ph.D.

Last December, three Doberman Pinscher bitches, 2 to 7 years old, were brought to our local shelter. The Dobies' owner had died, and none of his friends or family wanted the girls. Since dogs over 2 years old have much less chance of being adopted than do puppies and younger adults, the future for these three lovely ladies looked grim.

Most of us don't like to think about the possibility of our own deaths or disabilities. Yet we'll all die, and some of us will become seriously ill or injured. What happens then to our four-footed friends? Lack of planning on our part can leave our dogs and other companions in the hands of strangers, and could expose them to fates we would not want for them. A few simple steps can increase the chances that our loved and loving companions will be cared for.

### **First Things First**

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to protect your dogs in your absence is to ensure that someone will know they need care. This is especially important if you live alone. If no one knows about them, your dogs could suffer days or longer without food or water. If you crate or otherwise confine your dog to a small space, she could be stuck there for far too long -- not a pleasant thing to think about.

Emergency workers may need other information as well. How many dogs do you have and how does a stranger identify each one? Where are the dogs? Who will care for them? Where are their food, crates, treats, collars, health records? Do they have any special needs? How can you make all this information easily available?

One idea is to carry a wallet-size card, something like a medical alert card, close to your driver's license or other identification. I made mine slightly larger than my driver's license so that a flap with the words **IMPORTANT INFORMATION** sticks out over the top of the license, raising the likelihood that anyone trying to identify me will read my pet card.

The main text of my card says "If I have been injured or killed, please notify one of the people named below that my pets need to be cared for. If the call is long-distance, you may call collect -- simply say 'It's about Sheila Boneham.'" The names, telephone numbers, and addresses of two people who have agreed to be responsible for my animals in case of emergency are provided. The bottom of the card says, "If a pet is in this car, please see additional information in the glove

compartment."

At home, I post a card in a window near the front door. It says, "EMERGENCY PERSONNEL -- In case of emergency, please care for my animals. I have 3 dogs and 3 cats. Additional information can be found in garage 'PET CENTER' and auto glove

The next step is to assemble the packets, one for each car and one for home, using the "five-point plan" covering who, what, where, when, and how.

### **Who Will Care?**

Once you make it known that you have one or more animals, you need to identify who will take over in your absence. Make a list of likely candidates. Speak to your first choice, making certain you are both clear about what you want for each dog and what the other person can and is willing to provide. It's a good idea to have an alternate caretaker in case your first choice is unavailable in an emergency.

A reciprocal agreement with a friend for care of one another's dogs can be a good arrangement, as long as the terms are clear. Putting an agreement in writing not only reassures the owner and protects the dogs, but serves as proof that the owner did indeed want a specific person to take over in her place.

Written agreements for animal care can take several forms, including contracts, trusts, and wills. You may want to speak to an attorney to determine the best type of document for your situation and local and state laws.

Attorney Mary Randolph, author of *Dog Law*, notes that a revocable living trust may be the best way to transfer ownership of an animal. With a living trust there is no time-consuming and expensive probate process, so each of your dogs will go immediately to the person you have chosen. Whatever form you use, if you would rather your sister Minnie, who will inherit the bulk of your estate, didn't take your dogs home to her seven kids and unfenced yard, you need to specify in writing who will take the dog.

A written agreement can also guide the caretaker through potentially difficult situations. For example, what your dogs and your friend's dogs can't get along together? What if one of your dogs is seriously injured or becomes terminally ill? The written agreement should cover boarding and veterinary care and placement into a new home if necessary. It should also cover circumstances, such as severe illness or injury, under which you would want your dogs euthanized.

Another option is to establish an agreement with an appropriate breed rescue group or humane organization. As you would with an individual, you need to have a written agreement specifying

that the organization will place your orphaned dog in foster care, provide proper care, and attempt to find a suitable permanent home. You and a legal representative of the group should sign the document. If possible, will a sum of money to the group to cover care of your dog and, when she is settled in a new home, other rescued dogs. Better yet, give regular donations to help "your kind of dogs" while you're still around!

It's a good idea to review your agreement periodically. If your chosen foster dog-owner leads a fairly stable life, once a year is probably fine. If something unusual happens -- say one of you marries, or gets a new pet or two, or moves -- review the agreement as soon as possible. Occasionally it becomes necessary to find someone else to "god-parent" a dog, and it is better to be clear about that need than ignore changes that may jeopardize your canine friends, or put your human friend in a bind.

A word about euthanasia. Some people specify in their wills that when they die their animals should be humanely put down. However, courts frequently decline to carry out such instructions, particularly if the animals in question are young and healthy. People usually make the request based on a desire to protect their pets from pain and suffering. If a good home can be found for the animal, however, that fear is shown to be irrelevant. The best way to protect your dog from pain and suffering is by finding someone who will love and care for her in your stead.

### **What Caretakers Need to Know**

If you choose a reliable person, even if you don't provide additional information your dog is likely to be well cared for. You can make the task easier, though, by making information about each animal readily available for both short-term and long-term caretakers. Maintaining information packets both at home and in the car is an easy way to centralize information about your dogs.

My dogs frequently travel by car, so there is always a chance that one or more of them could be with me in an accident. A word here about crates for travel. I confess that I sometimes let my dogs ride in the back seat, but crates really are a safer way to transport dogs of all sizes. Not only do they prevent the dog from being thrown around, or even out of, the car in a collision, but they also keep the dog secure in the post-accident confusion. I can visualize nothing more horrifying than a confused, possibly already injured, dog loose on a roadway in the wake of a car wreck. It's important to remember, too, that many dogs will guard an incapacitated or deceased owner -- even a normally friendly dog may become understandably protective and potentially dangerous to would-be rescuers. If emergency workers are threatened by your unrestrained dog, they may see destroying the animal as their only option. A crate could prevent such a tragedy.

Since collars on crated dogs are dangerous, and in any event collars can be lost or removed, some form of permanent identification is advisable. For the present, the best option is to have each dog tattooed, and register the number with one of the national registries. Micro-chips implanted under the skin are another option, but I'm holding out until the technology is standardized, since not all

detectors and chips are compatible.

Though I hope I never need it, I keep a manila envelope marked "PET INFORMATION" in the glove compartment of each vehicle in which my animals regularly ride. Each of them has a separate #10 envelope inside the larger envelope -- even the cats, who reluctantly ride in the car about once a year to see the vet. The outside of each envelope indicates the animal's name, species and breed, color, and tattoo number. For instance, "Annie, yellow Labrador Retriever dog, female, tattoo number xxxxxx."

Inside the envelope is an "ID" sheet for the animal. This consists of a color photo with name, birthdate, breed, registration numbers, license number, and tattoo number; my veterinarian's name and phone number; and a photocopy of the animal's rabies certificate. The sheet provides information on what and when the animal eats, special treats it enjoys, medication it is taking, and any special needs it may have. I indicate what training each dog has had. Knowing that a dog will respond to certain commands, such as "sit," "down," and "stay," can be extremely useful to emergency personnel trying to handle it, and being confronted with a person who knows "its language" often reassures and calms a distressed dog. Finally, I note that additional information is located in the "pet center" in my garage at home.

It may be a good idea to reassure would-be samaritans about the cost of helping. One option is to include a signed statement indicating that you or your estate, or in certain cases someone else, will be responsible for all veterinary and boarding costs incurred by this animal. Place additional copies of that statement on file with your veterinarian, with your landlord if you have one, and with your "Emergency Pet Papers" at home. An alternative is to create a "lifetime care contract" with your veterinarian. Such a contract would obligate your vet to provide medical care for your dog from the time of your death until the death of the dog. In Dog Law, Randolph provides sample contracts which could be adapted to cover your dogs or other animals.

In an emergency, your dogs will be better off if caretakers can easily find everything they need. In my garage I store pet food in one central location. On the wall is a very visible sign that says PET CENTER, and a large envelope marked "Pet Information" hangs on a hook below the sign. This envelope is similar to the ones I keep in the cars, except this one includes additional information. For instance, I explain where I keep complete health records and registration and licensing documents. I mention that all my dogs are accustomed to being crated, and, since some people might not think to look in the bedroom and family room, I mention where they can find my crates. I also describe each dog's favorite toys and games, and what "formal" activities I participate in with each. For instance, a new owner (heaven forbid) might like to know -- and not suspect -- that Teddy loves to retrieve from water (that's what happens when an Aussie grows up with Labs!), or that all three have started tracking. Finally, I keep an envelope marked "Quick Cash" in the larger envelope. Inside is sufficient money to buy food and supplies for each animal in the household for a week.

Unusual arrangements concerning ownership of specific dogs should be clearly explained. For instance, if you are taking care of someone else's dog temporarily, make sure the animal and its

owner are identified. Show and breeding dogs are frequently co-owned or leased for short periods, but emergency personnel may not be familiar with such arrangements, so co-owners or lessors must be clearly identified. And, of course, if you have made arrangements with a friend to take your dogs, identify that person and his phone number clearly. Televisions left behind can wait, but your dogs need loving care immediately.

## **The Money Crunch**

As we all know, caring for our animals can become expensive. Depending on the ages, breeds, and general health of your dogs, the new caretaker could have them for more than a decade. Even routine veterinary care, food, and toys can add up.

If money is a potential problem for the designated caretaker, consider putting aside an emergency fund for food, veterinary care, and other needs. Mary and Elaine opened a joint savings account so that either one would have access to the money in the event of the other's death. They decided on a reasonable amount for each animal, and each of the women deposited her share based on the animals she owns.

Do not try to leave money directly to your dog. However we may think of our four-legged friends, the law regards them as property, and property cannot own property. In other words, animals cannot inherit money. Speak to an attorney about provisions that can be made in your will, or consider establishing a trust to provide for your dog. The designated caretaker or someone else, including the officer of a breed rescue or other organization, can be named as trustee. Another possibility is to take out a small life insurance policy on yourself payable to the caretaker to provide for your dog. Keep in mind that whether or not you leave money for the care of your dog, in your absence her life will be in someone else's hands. Money can ease the financial burden but it cannot give love and affection. Choose a caretaker carefully.

## **Happy Endings**

The story of the three Dobermans had a partly happy ending. One of the bitches became so distraught in the shelter that euthanasia seemed a kindness. But the local Doberman rescue group found homes for the other two and at last report they were adjusting happily to their new homes.

They were lucky, but many of their brethren are not. Planning is a far safer bet than luck when it comes to the care our best friends deserve, whether or not we are able to provide it ourselves.