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What happens to your pets when you cannot care for them?

Many of us have pets that mean everything to us. We take on the responsibility of caring for them, and become enraged when others do not care for animals properly or mistreat them or abandon them. Pets generally have a shorter lifespan than we do but what happens if we become ill, or injured, or incapacitated in some way? We might even die leaving our beloved pet behind. The Humane Society of the United States has a helpful fact sheet with information that we should think about now while we are able to do so. (<https://legacy.humanesociety.org/documents/h/humane-society-of-the-united-states/pets-in-wills-factsheet.pdf>).

The fact sheet, entitled "Providing for Your Pet's Future Without You," is a detailed listing of items that we may have considered already, as well as what to do to make sure that your pet is cared for properly if you get sick or die. As we know, pets need daily attention, sometimes more than once a day. If something unexpected happens to the owner/caregiver, the pets may be unattended for several days if prior arrangements have not been made. The Humane Society suggests some fairly simple precautions such as finding at least two responsible friends or relatives who agree to serve as temporary emergency caregivers in the event something unexpected happens to you. They should have pet care instructions, keys to your home, the name of your pet's vet, and the other caregiver's contact information. Make sure your neighbors know about your emergency pet caregivers, carry a wallet card indicating who to contact to take care of your pets, and have displayed in the house who is to be contacted in the event of an emergency to care for your pet or pets. Furthermore, it is very helpful to post removable "in case of emergency" notices to let EMTs and firefighters know how many pets that you have and what types. Do not use stickers that cannot be removed since they are often left by previous residents. Firefighters might assume that they are outdated or risk their lives looking for pets that are not there.

The fact sheet goes on to discuss what to do to establish permanent pet caregivers should you become seriously ill or die. It is important to make formal arrangements such as those that can be established in a Will. These arrangements should be reviewed periodically as the person or persons you choose may have a change in circumstances. Money should be left in trust so that the person taking your pet has money to handle pet care costs.

Other topics are discussed in the fact sheet, such as whether to choose an organization to provide care to your pet instead of an individual, and some issues related to that. You can authorize your executor to find a new home for your pet or pets if the designated caretakers do not work out. Legal assistance is recommended to make sure that the formal arrangements chosen are what is appropriate in your circumstances. Finally, requesting that your healthy pet be euthanized may be ruled invalid by the legal system if your pet is young and healthy.

As you can see, it is important to think about the long term when it comes to our pets. The unexpected and unthinkable can happen and your pets should not suffer if you plan ahead.