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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 14, 2023

Pet Estate Planning: What Happens to My Pets When I Die?

by

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Most pet owners are very aware of their furry friend's dependence on them and worry about what will happen to them when they die. Others may be faced with a pet owning relative or family member's death who did not have a plan in place for their animals. There are options to find homes for these animals and with some advance planning, you can make sure that your pets have loving forever homes after you die.

First, let us explore what happens if a relative or close friend dies and did not have a plan in place for the pet(s). See if you, a trusted friend, or family member can foster the pet, temporarily while you search for a new home for it. Perhaps one of these trusted people can be an emergency caregiver for the animal if it is left in the former owner's house. Be aware that when an animal has lost its' beloved owner, it can be out of sorts and the disruption in its routine can make it anxious and sometimes depressed. It may not eat well or act as it did previously, so take that into account when you or someone else is fostering or adopting. Be patient and give lots of TLC. If there is any question, contact a veterinarian.

If any of you can take on the responsibility of caring for a pet, consider keeping the pet yourself. If you are determined but do not have experience with keeping pets, your state or local veterinary medical association can provide you with information. Bookstores, libraries, and shelters also can point you in the right direction. Of course, you may not want potential adopters to have to fill out a lengthy questionnaire about their ability to adopt, but asking some basic questions in advance will help ensure the pet has a new forever home, rather than being shuffled from place to place because folks did not think ahead. Things to ask yourself or a potential adopter include: Are

Are there other pets in the home and if yes do they get along well with other animals? With children? Do they have enough space for the pet? Do they have any experience with pets? Do they have the financial ability, time, and resources to care for a pet? If the pet is elderly, are they comfortable taking care of an older animal? Are they comfortable assuming any medical or vet bills associated with the care of the pet if they were to adopt the pet?

If you cannot find someone you know to adopt the pet, an excellent idea is to put the information about the pet on the memorial site that you set up for the deceased, since many families and friends will visit the site and see that the pet is up for adoption. You can ask them to share the memorial website/adoption alert in their own circles to see if anyone is a good fit. Another option is to contact your local veterinarians. Many keep lists of clients or folks looking for specific types of pets, and you may find it a home that way. You can use sites like Petfinder.com and AdoptAPet.com to post the pet and let the community know you have a pet up for adoption. There are many breed-specific rescue groups around who may be able to help. Spread the word to everyone you can think of, including social media outlets: you would be amazed how often someone knows someone who is looking for a certain type of dog or cat.

As a last resort, contact your local shelters. Right now, shelters are overflowing with animals who need homes, so they may not have room. Be aware that not all shelters are 'no kill' shelters, and millions of animals are euthanized each year, especially older animals, because they are not adopted. Of course, no one wants to have to take an animal to the shelter, but if you have exhausted all other avenues, it may be the best chance for the animal to find a home. Shelter workers care deeply about the welfare of animals and want to find homes for animals just as badly as you do.

How can you plan for your own animals in the event of your death? First, talk to your friends and family and line up at least one (preferably two or three) emergency caregivers who are responsible and capable of caring for your pets for a few days. They are not necessarily ones who will give your pets forever homes, but rather they will care for your pets while a foster or permanent home can be found. They could even provide care for your pets in your home, in the event they cannot take your pets into theirs.

Make sure that these emergency caregivers have feeding and care instructions for your pets, contact information for your veterinarian and a key to your house. You will want to make sure the rest of your family, friends and loved ones know how many pets you have, and that contact information for your emergency caregivers is available. Keep this information somewhere in your home that is easy to find or even in your purse or wallet.

Consider setting up a trust for your pet(s) in your will. Before you scoff at the idea, thinking of the stories about eccentric millionaires who have left fortunes to their dogs and cats, know that a pet trust can save your pets' life. It is a legal agreement providing

for the care of your pet in the event of your death. With a trust, you set aside money for the care of your pet(s). You assign a specific trustee, who takes control of the trust if you die or become unable to care for your pets. Because this is a legally enforceable arrangement, you can rest assured that your directions regarding your pet will be followed. You can describe the standard of care your pet should have, list the people who would be willing to provide that care, require regular inspections of your pet by the trustee, and even provide instructions for the final disposition of your pet (for example, burial or cremation.) Your lawyer can help you with the specifics including ensuring you have a recipient in place of any funds remaining after your pet dies or is euthanized.

You will want to check in with your pet care team from time to time: Life situations may change, and if they have changed their minds, you will need to find other people who can take on the responsibility. Resist simply giving money to a person on the condition that it is used to care for your pet, avoiding the work of making a trust. This gives the money to that person without requiring him or her to use the money to benefit your pet.

With some planning ahead, you can make sure your pets are provided for in the event of your death and with some effort you can find avenues and spread the word to find a home for the pet if an owner dies without a plan for it. This way, your pets can live out their lives with a safe forever home. For more information on planning ahead for your pets' care, visit the Pet Endowment Trust at petendowment.org.

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The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) is a professional organization of 380 veterinarians dedicated to compassionate animal care and quality medicine.