

Tips for veterinarians involved in removal or rescue of animals from hoarding situations

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Ideally, veterinary involvement should occur at the earliest possible stages when a rescue is being contemplated. If possible, it is helpful to include the veterinarian on the investigative team to view the conditions on site. Proper planning is the key to making what will always be a challenging process go as smoothly as possible. You need to be ready for anything and everything—expect the unexpected. Preparation for a large scale rescue is not unlike disaster planning in its complexity and scope. Issues that need to be considered include the following:

Species and jurisdiction—Although hoarders tend to concentrate on one species, e.g., dogs or cats, it is not uncommon for a menagerie to be discovered. In one recent case, a total of 259 animals, including many exotic and endangered species, were removed from a townhouse by a humane society in Canada. The collection was so diverse that expert zoologists were called in just to aid with identification of the species. Proper identification of species is important for providing proper husbandry as well as to determine the legal status of the animal. It is wise to check ahead of time to verify which other parties, if any, need to be notified or involved. The Fish and Wildlife department in each state or the state veterinarian are probably the best sources of information about which animals are specifically permitted or exempted at the state level. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has [seven regional offices](#) that handle law enforcement issues as well as the permitting process for federally regulated species.

Specific husbandry needs—Be sure to familiarize yourself with the normal husbandry of each species present or suspected to be present prior to intervention. Some species may be inherently difficult to handle because of their temperament or size. If exotic species, farm animals or birds are to be removed, the standard shelter housing conditions may not be suitable and special arrangements will need to be made. Depending on the numbers and husbandry needs, can you adequately house the animals at the shelter or will alternative housing be required? Is temporary MASH-type housing an option using portable or collapsible cages or fencing? Would it be preferable to house the animals on-site to provide care? If so, can the site be adequately secured to protect the health and security of the animals and safety of staff? Special accommodations may need to be made if nursing mothers, sexually intact males, females in heat, neonatal animals, or geriatric animals are present. If exotic animals are present, it may mean obtaining special diets and bedding ahead of time. Will the services of a zoo or specialty sanctuary be required? If large animals are unable to rise or need to be removed from confined spaces, will special rescue equipment (hoists, sliding supports, winches) be needed?

Contagious and zoonotic diseases—Particularly if species other than those you are completely familiar with are present, it is worth reviewing what types of zoonoses could be present and the diagnostic tools necessary to rule out infection or contagion. For example, in March 1996 in San Mateo County, California 230 goats were seized by a shelter. Subsequently, at least 10 people became ill and were serologically confirmed to have Q fever, which was also documented in the herd. If zoonotic diseases are believed to be present or can be anticipated, what special precautions may be necessary to protect the safety of staff and other animals? Will you need special equipment, protective clothing, new training or staff education to minimize risk of transmission?

Diseases that are contagious to other animals should probably be expected to be present until proven otherwise. What implications will this have for isolation and housing at the shelter or for veterinary treatment? Will you have the required medications in stock in sufficient quantity? Particularly if agricultural species are kept, are there any notifiable or reportable diseases of concern to the agricultural industry in the state that you should be looking out for? The risk of a problem is enhanced when diverse species of unknown origin are mixed and kept under questionable circumstances. It is probably worth contacting both the state veterinarian and the state public health veterinarian if you anticipate such a situation. If certain contagious diseases are present, the office of the state veterinarian may be able to add some regulatory leverage to your efforts by imposing and enforcing a quarantine of the premises.

Confinement status—Consider whether the animals are free roaming, tied, or confined in some manner. If free roaming, how will the environmental conditions help or hamper removal? Are certain animals or types of animals confined to specific areas for some reason? Is there an order that must be preserved? Will animals need to be trapped, removed from tight or inaccessible spaces such as walls or ceilings, or lured to a confined area? What kind and how much special equipment will be necessary to accomplish this? This could include traps, baits, squeeze cages, protective gloves or clothing, catch poles, nets, and tranquilizing devices. Will controlled substances be needed for capture? Is there any danger to neighbors or the community if there is an escape? Do you need secondary barriers brought in to prevent escape during capture? Have you allocated sufficient time and staff for a patient and humane capture process? If trapping will be required, is there a plan for access during the extended rescue?

Socialization and temperament—In hoarding situations, you can expect to encounter everything from calm socialized pets to exotic species that cannot be handled without sedation. Your plan must protect the animals from each other as well as protect staff from the animals. What are the implications for the skill level of personnel needed to safely remove the animals, the expected time frame for rescue, transport, veterinary examination, treatment, and housing? If intact males are present, this may pose additional constraints on how quickly and safely the animals can be moved. Consider whether conditions require special capture equipment or personnel with training in capture of difficult or dangerous species, customized transportation and housing, and the availability of veterinary specialists for those species.

Coordination with other agencies—One of the factors that inhibit optimal resolution of hoarding cases is that shelters tend to tackle these problems alone. A better approach is to identify and coordinate with all relevant agencies and individuals. The list will vary with each situation and each community, but the following should be considered: Health Department, State Veterinarian, State Public Health Veterinarian, State Wildlife agency, Department of Aging or Adult Protective Services, Child Protection, Mental Health, Sanitation, Zoning, [Code Enforcement](#), and Hazardous Waste management. All of this will be much simpler if the shelter veterinarian has existing professional relationships with some of these agencies. A good place to start would be to introduce yourself to the local health department or public health veterinarian.

Examination of animals—Despite the fact that you may be dealing with a “herd” of animals, it is still important to carefully examine each animal and document its condition in a medical record. Particularly when large numbers of animals and / or multiple veterinarians are involved, triage may be more easily accomplished using an easily scored instrument like the [TACC scales](#) (see link on this website). The veterinary examination needs to be done in a careful, systematic manner and documented extensively. These records may end up as evidence in a criminal prosecution or a civil administrative proceeding. A thorough physical examination should be supported by accurately labeled photographs containing unambiguous identification of the animals pictured, and documented in clearly written medical records suitable for presentation in court. A minimum database would include estimated age, an accurate body weight and body condition score, a fecal examination, and a thorough oral examination to establish condition of the teeth. Be sure to review any species-specific features that should be examined and noted.

It is important that the examination be done prior to any treatment that would alleviate or mitigate the conditions present, providing the delay is not contraindicated on humane grounds. Since in the majority of these cases, animals will have been living in the conditions for many months or years, a careful methodical exam should not be contraindicated. Since socialization and temperament may become a factor in the eventual placement of the animals, these characteristics should be noted. If dead animals are present, the bodies should undergo a forensic necropsy to establish cause and approximate time of death. Note any unusual placement, ordering, or attempts to conceal bodies that suggest awareness of the deaths. The evidence collection procedures should be coordinated with law enforcement agencies and prosecuting attorneys to ensure that all relevant evidence is collected and documented in a way that will stand up in court.

The media—One additional complication of dealing with hoarding cases is that they are often very newsworthy and become high profile in the media. This will bring a level of public scrutiny to the cases that veterinarians may not expect. Therefore, it is important that they develop good skills in communicating the details of the situation and condition of the animals when the press calls. With media attention, there will likely be a public response to adopt or foster the rescued animals. There may also be great public interest in their health and progress. If euthanasia is likely to be necessary, it is important to remember that the interested public will ultimately become part of that dialogue. A

recent article describing [how the media have typically reported these cases](#) may be useful to better understand how a well-written medical record can better reflect the extent and duration of neglect and contribution of the hoarder to the situation.⁶²

Euthanasia—It is important to have a plan in place regarding euthanasia if it becomes necessary. When an animal is seized under a warrant, then it is technically part of the evidence in the case and cannot be euthanized except in extreme medical circumstances. It is important to consult with the prosecuting attorney ahead of time to develop mutually agreed upon guidelines when euthanasia is necessary to relieve suffering. In some cases, when an animal is in extremis and natural death is imminent, you may have no choice. It is absolutely essential to completely document why this was necessary. However, a more typical presentation is that the animals may not be in extremis, but severely debilitated or very ill. In these cases, saving some lives may be technically possible but not feasible from a practical standpoint because of the severity of their condition. Sheer numbers may sometimes preclude treatment for less serious ailments. All of these scenarios should be discussed ahead of time, and a clear plan of approach documented. In order to protect yourself, it may be advisable to obtain a supporting opinion from a second veterinarian before any animal is euthanized.

All too frequently, euthanasia may be necessary primarily because the shelter is already overwhelmed with adoptable pets, and not because the rescued animals are beyond rehabilitation. In those situations, the ethical dilemma is that making room for a large number of unhealthy, poorly socialized animals would not be justifiable if it meant euthanizing pets that may be more adoptable. This is a very slippery slope, and one that should be considered carefully before a rescue is attempted. It may cause conflict among the shelter staff and volunteers, criticism from the public and adverse attention from the media. It can be difficult to explain why animals that were rescued and that are medically treatable need to be euthanized because there is not sufficient room. Alternative plans should be considered as much as possible ahead of time to see if foster homes, rescue groups, or some form of temporary housing could be arranged that would allow rehabilitatable animals to be saved. If mass euthanasia is necessary, the veterinarian will ultimately be called on to justify it.

Euthanasia in these situations poses logistical challenges that must be addressed as well. At minimum, it should be performed in a manner consistent with the [AVMA panel guidelines](#) and all applicable state laws. Where will it be done? If it is done on site, is there a place where it can be done in a quiet, private manner so that animals are not stressed and not in view of each other or onlookers? Have you reviewed techniques for birds, reptiles, or exotic species? Are sufficient drugs available, and if controlled substances are needed, are you prepared for adequate record keeping? How will carcass transport and disposal be handled?

Examination of the environment—Most of the time, this part of the investigation will be handled by humane officers, animal control, or other police agency. However, since the environment of the animals is intimately linked to their health status and the adequacy of their care, it is advantageous if the shelter veterinarian can personally view

and document conditions at the site. Veterinarians are the best trained individuals to comment on sanitation; water and air quality; adequacy of protection from the elements consistent with the laws governing various species; safety; and general husbandry. Particularly since starvation is such a prominent feature of many hoarding cases, it is essential to carefully document the quantity, quality, and availability of all food on the premises for each species kept. If possible, examine receipts or other evidence of purchase of food. Anything removed from the premises needs to be properly stored, labeled, and secured as it may be needed as evidence.

Assisting people at risk—In order to build the most effective case, it is important to take a broad approach to the situation and pay attention to the human and public health aspects that are likely to be present. The public health and elder neglect issues are important aspects of animal hoarding that go largely unrecognized and that may provide avenues for intervention. Careful documentation of the human living circumstances can go a long way to eventually helping the animal victims.

For most hoarders, living spaces are often compromised to the extent that they no longer serve the function for which they were intended. Appliances and basic utilities (heat, plumbing, and electricity) frequently are inoperative. Household functioning is often so impaired that both food preparation and maintaining basic sanitation are impossible. Rodent and insect infestations as well as odors can create a neighborhood nuisance. The clutter can pose a fire hazard, especially if utilities are not working and fireplaces or kerosene heaters are used for heat. Access to electrical outlets, heating ducts, and exits to the building are often absent in hoarding situations and violate municipal codes. Municipal plumbing, electrical, sanitation, and public nuisance [codes are often quite specific and can be an avenue for access and intervention](#).

Despite the high degree of impairment in household functioning, few hoarders seem to meet criteria for mental incompetence or immediate danger to the community, so options for intervention along those lines are limited. The criteria for an administrative search warrant to check for code compliance are typically less stringent than a criminal warrant, so familiarizing yourself with local regulations for human housing can be very helpful when trying to improve conditions for animals. What is not yet widely appreciated is that in many animal hoarding situations other family members, e.g., minor children, dependent elderly or disabled adults, are present and are also victims of this behavior. The conditions may well meet criteria for adult self-neglect, child neglect and/or elder abuse. In one state ([Illinois](#)), veterinarians are among the mandated reporters of elder abuse, and have a legal duty to report these situations.

Due to the substantial accumulation of feces and urine in hoarding households, environmental ammonia levels may be dangerously high. [Workplace health references](#) list from 35 to 50 ppm as the maximum average occupational exposure during an 8 hour workday. Levels above 25 ppm begin to irritate the nasal passages. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) lists 50ppm as the maximum workplace exposure. and further defines a concentration of 300 ppm as a concentration ‘immediately dangerous to life or health’. There is ample evidence in the animal science

literature on the detrimental effects of elevated atmospheric ammonia on appetite and weight gain in farm animals. Pigs exposed continuously to 103 - 145 ppm reduced their consumption of feed and had weight loss. In many hoarding situations, it is difficult for a non-acclimated person to breathe without respiratory protection. This suggests there is good reason to believe ammonia levels may be very high. In one case, an ammonia level of 152 ppm was recorded after the home had been ventilated by the fire department. Measuring environmental ammonia is not technically difficult and could be a valuable tool for supporting the need for veterinary intervention. It can be done with the cooperation of an industrial hygienist or anyone dealing with hazardous materials management. There is also a small self-contained measuring device can be purchased for under \$500 (see [web link](#) on this site).

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