

Animal Hoarding: A Hidden Danger in the Sport of Purebred Breeding?

by The STOLA Education Group

Our rescue organization, STOLA-Saluki Tree of Life Alliance, is the national rescue organization for Salukis. We were recently involved in a rescue of 39 purebred Salukis from a hoarder/breeder who had repeatedly caused her Salukis to live in horrific conditions for more than twenty years. Alexandra Shalmers of the Elektra Gazelle Hound Kennels (also known as Sandy Moss, and a host of other aliases) is a hoarder and, like most hoarders, she repeats her behavior to the extreme detriment of the animals. A rescue of her dogs previously occurred in 1988 in Texas, undertaken by a group of caring individuals, but in that instance no criminal charges were filed. Then in 2005, STOLA worked with a group of dedicated, courageous volunteers to bring Alexandra Shalmers to justice. She was finally convicted on multiple counts of animal cruelty in October, 2005. In November 2005, the American Kennel Club suspended Ms. Shalmers for life and heavily fined her. The intriguing steps that led to this outcome, the hidden, secret lives of hoarders, and the effects on the unfortunate animals that are held in captivity by a hoarder are the subjects of this article. Only by an awareness of the facts surrounding animal hoarding can the canine community band together to prevent the extreme misery and suffering of the animals caused by hoarders.

Why the purebred fancy should be concerned about Animal Hoarding.

Animal Hoarding was first identified and researched in 1997 by Dr.

Gary J. Patronek, DVM, Ph.D., and his team through HARC at the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, MA. Dr. Patronek and his associates were the first to use the terminology animal hoarding and to write a definition of the phrase, thus, an animal hoarder is defined as: "Someone who accumulates a large number of animals, fails to provide even the minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation and veterinary care, and fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation and even death), or the environment (severe overcrowding, extremely unsanitary conditions) or the negative effect of the collection on their own health and well-being and on that of other household members." As further noted from the Tufts University Veterinary Medical School Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC): "Animal hoarding, previously known as collecting, is a poorly understood phenomenon which transcends simply owning or caring for more than the typical number of pets, and affects every community in the US. It has serious consequences for people, animals, and communities. New cases are reported in the media each day, dozens of others go unreported, and still more undetected. Animal hoarding is a community problem. It is cruel to animals, can devastate families, be associated with elder abuse, child abuse, and self-neglect, and be costly for municipalities to resolve. Without appropriate post-intervention treatment, recidivism approaches 100%. Increased awareness, leading to more comprehensive

long-term interventions, is needed. Animal Hoarding is not about animal sheltering, rescue, or sanctuary, and should not be confused with these legitimate efforts to help animals. It is about satisfying a human need to accumulate animals and control them, and this need supersedes the needs of the animals involved." Animal hoarding is far more prevalent than most people realize. Up to 2,000 cases are discovered in the United States every year - which adds up to the suffering of many thousands of animals - and that may only be the tip of the iceberg.

Hoarding, by definition, is a condition in which animals are deprived of even minimal standards of care. The consequences of this deprivation vary in each situation, depending on how far it deteriorates until discovered. In some cases, particularly in the early stages, the visible signs of suffering are few - perhaps mild weight loss, poor hair coat, and parasites. Despite whatever physical afflictions do or do not develop, the psychological suffering from intensive confinement will go even more unnoticed. As conditions deteriorate and crowding increases, irritating levels of ammonia develop from the accumulated feces and urine, infectious diseases may spread, injuries develop and are not treated, sick animals are ignored, and the early stages of starvation may begin. As conditions spiral downward, animals die from lack of food or water and untreated illness or injury. It is not unusual for dead animals to be found among the living, with some animals cannibalizing the corpses of others. In some cases, this may

involve only a few animals, in other cases, homes or farms become literal graveyards, with bodies scattered where they fell.

Even when confronted with the obvious - feces piled a foot or more, dead animals in human living spaces, a home unfit for habitation by humans or animals - the hoarder will deny that anything is wrong or minimize the interpretation of circumstances or events. This was certainly the case with the Elektra Salukis who lived in filth with no running water, no air conditioning or heat, and had to fight for their meager rations with the hordes of rats that lived on the property. After the rescue, many of the dogs were found to be covered in scars from old rat bites and all were tested for leptospirosis, an infection which is carried by rats.

Hoarders can fool you. In public they may appear to be well dressed, productive members of society. They often take great care with their appearance and may present a polished, even superior image which belies the filth and degradation in which they live. Dr. Patronek's findings suggest that in hoarding cases, there will usually be one person involved, or perhaps a couple. Typically, animal hoarders tend to be female, older and solitary. They concentrate on one or two species of animals and fail to acknowledge the extent of the lack of sanitation and animal suffering. They may also be on disability, retired or unemployed.

What happens when the hoarder is also a breeder?

It may be easy to spot the "dog lady" down the street who has too many animals, but what happens when an animal hoarder is also a breeder? This area should be of great concern to purebred dog fanciers. Because hoarders can pass for "normal" people who are well dressed, polite, and well spoken, they may be easily able to hide their dark secret. In the case of the Elektra Saluki rescue, the hoarder/breeder was protected by friends in the Saluki community who did not understand the depth of her

illness nor the conditions in which she kept her dogs. She did not allow anyone to visit her home, and she presented a very charming exterior when she appeared at public dog events. Misguided people, trying to help, wound up enabling her to continue her slide into mental illness and her cruelty to the animals because they did not understand animal hoarding which often is only apparent in its entirety when one enters the home of a hoarder and sees the astoundingly filthy conditions in which they live. In fact, the homes of animal hoarders are sometimes so appalling that the premises have to be burned down or bulldozed.

Reputable breeders and rescue groups can ensure that their animals will not fall into the hands of a hoarder by not only doing extensive interviews, but also making a visit to the premises before placing a dog in any home.

The Psychological Underpinnings of Animal Hoarding

Understanding the psychological make-up of an animal hoarder may help legitimate breeders and rescue groups devise ways and means to bring a hoarder to justice, gain custody of the abused dogs, and encourage mental health treatment for the hoarder. According to Dr. Patronek, "Perhaps the most prominent psychological feature of these individuals is that pets (and other possessions) become central to the hoarder's core identity. The hoarder develops a strong need for control, and just the thought of losing an animal can produce an intense grief-like reaction."

This may account for the difficulty this causes observers of hoarders who misunderstand the "grief" reaction for a real concern for the animal's welfare when, in fact, hoarders are concerned with their own needs and not the condition of the animals at all. One of the main points made by HARC about the disease of animal hoarding is that while hoarders may view themselves as saviors of the animals, they are driven by a need to control.

Hoarding is not about loving or saving, it is about power and control - the power to control a helpless creature. Animal hoarding is a form of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) - hoarding rationale is that nobody could possibly care for the animal as well as they can nor, more importantly, love them as much as they do. This fiction is part of the hoarder's mental illness. It has also been suggested that animal hoarding is a form of passive cruelty. Hoarders typically profess a great love for their animals and yet, by everyone else's standards, the conditions under which the animals live are nothing short of barbaric - homes are usually cluttered and unsanitary with feces all over the house, debris, rats, fleas and other parasites and, in many cases rotting corpses of the very animals that these people profess to love so dearly. Conditions in some homes are often such that even the Animal Control officers, ultimately called to deal with these cases, are known to vomit at the sights that greet them when they finally gain access. The stench of rotting debris, of feces and ammonia from pets that do all their 'business' within four walls make it not only a dangerous and unhealthy proposition for these case workers, but also for the residents who live with the animals, and of course the animals themselves.

The Role of Excuses in Animal Hoarding

One of the most exasperating parts of dealing with an animal hoarder is the wide range of excuses that are offered for the behavior and the substandard condition of the animals and environment. Hoarders are almost always in a state of complete denial. Typically they may say that "the house is just a little messy" and "the animals are fine", when you may have to pick your way through rotting corpses. A hoarder's excuses are driven by attempts to maintain a positive self-image and self-esteem. Self-images are developed for both internal and external audiences. External audiences are those

people who may be in a position to evaluate a person's actions. Maintaining a positive image is important, and perhaps even essential, to enable a person to continue certain types of behaviors and avoid certain consequences. For animal hoarders, HARC suggests that animals may be an important identity building device, and that the animals may be critical for the hoarder's self esteem. (Patronek, HARC, 2003)

System Failure: The Role of the Law in Relation to Animal Hoarders

Perhaps the biggest problem in trying to stop animal hoarding is the lack of strong animal laws. There is NO Federal Law which regulates the care of pet animals by private owners or animal shelters. However, every state in the U.S. has animal cruelty statutes which prohibit cruel treatment and/or require an owner to provide proper shelter, adequate nutrition and clean water, a sanitary safe environment, and necessary veterinary care. If found guilty of animal cruelty, in the form of neglect, it is usually a Class 1 or Class A misdemeanor with the possibility of a jail sentence up to 12 months and fines up to \$2,500, depending on the locality. Sentencing is discretionary. Thus, on a very simple level, it seems that hoarding would be an obvious violation of the most basic provisions. In actual practice, establishing a violation of the law is more difficult than it might appear from reading the statutes, for a variety of reasons, one being the way the laws are written. The language in the legislation is often vague and antiquated, leaving ample room for interpretation. Such terms as: unnecessarily fails to provide it with proper food, drink, shelter, sanitary environment or protection from the weather; or, knowingly and willfully authorizes or permits an animal to be subjected to unnecessary torture, suffering or cruelty, are typical. Unfortunately, when these cases reach the courts, words such as "unnecessary", "proper", "knowingly" and "willfully" can be fatal in cases in which intent is unlikely and difficult to

prove regardless, when proper standards of care are not defined in statute, and when extenuating personal circumstances of the hoarder can provide a loophole for defining what is "necessary".

An additional problem is that much of the cruelty which arises in these situations is psychological suffering from chronic neglect, intensive confinement in small cages, and lack of opportunities to socialize with either people or other animals, or being confined in close proximity to animals which may be aggressive or threatening. These factors might best be described as "quality of life" issues, something which is almost uniformly absent from existing statutes in any explicit sense. Therefore, each court is left to its own combination of expert testimony and prevailing community standards. Even when statutory husbandry standards exist, often they apply only to specific entities such as pet stores, shelters, kennels, and catteries, leaving individuals such as hoarders untended by the law. As a result of such problems in definition and interpretation, punishment for persons convicted of animal neglect, regardless of how cruel such neglect may appear to those in the dog fancy, varies significantly and is generally on the lighter side. It is worth noting that in reviewing animal hoarding convictions in the PetAbuse.com database, in the vast majority of convictions jail sentences were suspended, fines were of little consequence, and mandatory mental health counseling was not imposed. Probationary periods of short duration were common, such as one to five years, and limited to the state wherein the hoarder resides. It is readily apparent that such sentences will hardly act as a deterrent to a convicted animal hoarder. Because of these system failures, unless an animal hoarder voluntarily seeks help for their mental health condition, or is encouraged by family and friends to seek help, they are almost certain to repeat past behavior. Unless the animal hoarder is found in violation of their probationary conditions or

other agreed upon terms, he/she is free to resume the hoarding activities, and the cycle of abuse begins anew.

Legal authorities are not required to act as watchdogs to enforce the terms of a conviction, and it is up to the community at large to spot new cases of animal cruelty and report them.

Further, gathering evidence sufficient to bring charges against an animal hoarder to begin with is not an easy task. It is difficult for authorities to investigate the full conditions of the home and animals as all individuals are protected by law against unwarranted searches, and hoarders can turn away attempts to inspect the inside of their premises. They will provide authorities proof of food and water, even though the quantity of food may be severely less than required for the number of animals they own. Authorities may also be convinced the animals have adequate shelter as many are maintained, often hidden, in the home. Since authorities are rarely allowed in the hoarder's home to see the actual conditions unless they have procured a warrant, they walk away reporting the animals have food, water and shelter. Additionally, while the condition of the hoarder's property may deteriorate to a devastating and unhealthy degree, laws protect the individual's right to live as they choose. The laws at present that cause investigation and result in condemning the home require that the house be adjacent to another, thereby directly affecting the health and rights of others. Breeders often live in a country setting away from nearby neighbors which makes it easier to live in the secrecy required by a hoarder. Despite these obstacles, investigation under the cruelty to animal's statutes is often the only way to begin an intervention in hoarding cases. Such an investigation should be conducted by, or with guidance from, a highly experienced humane investigator. From start to finish, collection of evidence in these cases needs to be airtight to get a search warrant that will stand up and lead to either a conviction or the possibility of a favorable negotiated agreement or plea bargain. 🐾

A COORDINATED APPROACH TO STOPPING AN ANIMAL HOARDER

- 1. Identification:** First identify the problem. A person with a lot of animals is not necessarily a hoarder. If the animals are well kept, well exercised, well fed, and given adequate medical care then hoarding is not an issue. Signs of hoarding include poorly maintained animals kept in filthy conditions. Gaining access to a property to determine its condition, however, can be a big problem if the suspected hoarder does not allow visits to the home - which is usually the case.
- 2. Intervention:** Contacting family or close friends and asking for their cooperation in dealing with the problem may be helpful if done in a sensitive and compassionate manner. A compassionate approach is often the most effective and should always be the first option. Hoarders are often mentally ill, aged, infirm, and/or living on fixed incomes. While some may reject offers of help, others will gratefully accept. The main concern is ensuring that the animals get adequate care.
- 3. Preparation:** Gather facts which will be essential if the authorities are to be contacted. If the hoarder will not permit visits inside the residence, exterior signs may give warning as to interior conditions. Warning signs of unsanitary living conditions may include: Obstructed exits -- Nonfunctional utilities including running water, electricity, etc. -- Inadequate light and ventilation -- Nonfunctional kitchen facilities -- Improper garbage disposal -- Obvious odors emanating from the property -- Rodent infestations -- Potential fire hazards, i.e. accumulated trash, overgrown dead foliage, etc.
- 4. Recruit a Team:** A number of agencies and/or individuals can form a consortium to do a positive intervention including animal control, breed rescue organization, health department, veterinarian, family members or close friends of the hoarder. Veterinarians can be a tremendous help or a hindrance in hoarding cases. If you can gain the trust of the presumed hoarder's veterinarian(s) the following are warning signs which may indicate a hoarder: Veterinary warning signs: A constantly changing parade of pets, most seen once and not again -- Visits for problems not usually seen in good preventive health care like trauma or infectious disease -- Rarely bringing in the same animal for diseases of old age such as cancer or heart disease -- Suspected hoarder may travel great distances to the practice, come at odd hours and use multiple vets so as not to tip them off about the number of animals -- May seek heroic and futile care for animals -- May perfume or bathe animals prior to a visit to conceal odor -- May bring in a relatively presentable animal in an attempt to get medication for more seriously ill animals at home -- May try to persuade the vet to give medication or refills without seeing the animals -- Being unwilling or unable to say how many animals they have -- May claim to have just found or rescued an animal in obviously deplorable condition although the condition of the animal, including strong odor of urine, overgrown nails and muscle atrophy, may be more indicative of confinement in filthy conditions than of wandering the streets -- May show interest in acquiring even more animals, including checking the office bulletin board and questioning other clients in the waiting room. Be aware of this twist: hoarders may seek employment or volunteer opportunities with veterinary clinics, perhaps on a part-time basis, to have access to free or discounted medications or supplies.
- 5. Keep Detailed Records:** Gather all evidence and facts in a detailed manner. Meticulous record keeping is essential to provide necessary evidence to obtain search warrants, serious consideration by animal control and so on. If photographic evidence is gathered, be sure to log the photographer's name, date and time the picture was taken, location of the photo, and names of witnesses. Attach this information to the back of the photo. Often complaints to authorities must be made within 72 hours of suspected animal abuse. Keep duplicate copies of all evidence.
- 6. Contact Authorities:** This may require extreme patience and persistence. Animal control is often hampered by privacy laws and cannot intervene without hard evidence of potential abuse and/or a signed statement from a witness. It may be necessary to contact several agencies such as animal control, local health department, social services, breed rescue group, etc. to create an interactive intervention process.
- 7. Patience, Persistence, Determination:** Never give up. The animals are depending on you. Getting justice for the animals and getting them out of an abuser's control can take weeks, months, or even years but for all the animals who are saved from a hellish existence, the effort is definitely worth it.
- 8. Preventing the Abuse Cycle:** Even if convicted of animal abuse, hoarders are highly likely to begin hoarding again. In most cases the laws fail in not monitoring the activity of a convicted hoarder allowing them to begin the cycle of abuse all over again. The only way to prevent a hoarder from beginning again is through public awareness, education and vigilance. If you suspect that hoarding is occurring in your community don't turn a blind eye. Become a voice for the animals who cannot speak for themselves.

SIGNS OF AN ANIMAL HOARDER

- ~ Hoarders are most often older women who live alone.
- ~ Hoarders typically have no support network of family or friends.
- ~ Hoarders are typically on disability, retired or unemployed.
- ~ Up to 2000 cases of hoarding are known to occur in the U.S. each year.
- ~ While hoarders profess their love for animals, hoarding is not about love but about control.
- ~ Hoarding is considered a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Hoarders are mentally ill.
- ~ Hoarders are usually in a state of complete denial; they do not see the destruction they cause.
- ~ Hoarding is defined not by the numbers of animals, but by the way they are kept.
- ~ Hoarders put their personal and community health at risk.
- ~ Hoarders fail to provide even minimal standards of care or sanitation.
- ~ Homes of hoarders are usually in such filthy condition that the premises have to be destroyed.
- ~ Even if convicted of hoarding, hoarders are usually able to move and begin the cycle again--there is almost a 100% rate of repetition.

In the next issue we will continue the hoarding feature with a hoarding case study,

“The Elektra Rescue - A Personal Record of Events” by Ray Domkiewicz

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