

# Estate planning should include provisions for pets

**Erica Curless** The Spokesman-Review

If Shirley Alexander and her husband die unexpectedly, they know exactly what will happen to their three beloved cats.

Chloe, Oliver and Sophie are included in their will, just like their Spokane Valley home, valuables and money. It directs that the cats, all adopted from local shelters, go to SpokAnimal for adoption.

“People just don’t realize how important it is,” said Alexander, 73, who has loved cats her entire life and has sponsored more than 500 cats in local shelters. “They’re like kids. You have to have a plan for them if something happens.”

Local animal shelters encourage everyone – not just the elderly – to have a succession plan for their pets because tragedy could strike any time. If there isn’t a plan for a pet, often it causes a family crisis or a whole lot of guilt in addition to an unsure future for the pet that’s used to top-notch care and love.

“The problem is so many people just assume their family will take their pets and that’s not necessarily the way it goes,” said Gail Mackie, executive director of SpokAnimal. “We think everyone should have a will.”

Alexander also has created a scrapbook detailing care instructions, medical needs and each animal’s likes and dislikes. The shelter has a copy along with Alexander’s grown daughter who lives in Alaska and doesn’t want the responsibility of the cats.

Chloe, a long-haired black cat with a white face and paws, is friendly and playful, prone to showing off for guests. After all, she is a queen – starring as the cat queen of the 2013 SCRAPS auction. It’s hard to imagine she was once a stray kitten found near the Spokane County courthouse.

Oliver weighs 20 pounds and his orange and cream coat puffs with anxiety when Alexander introduces him to newcomers.

Sophie, the recluse, refuses to come out of hiding when visitors arrive. Yet all three greet Alexander at the door when she gets off her late shift at Holy Family Hospital where she works in patient support in the emergency room.

These are all traits SpokAnimal must know to find the best possible home for each cat if their pet parents die.

Both SpokAnimal and the Spokane Humane Society can help people plan for the future of their pets. If no family or friend is willing to take the animal, then both organizations are willing to rehome the pet or even in some instances provide care for the pet at the shelter.

The shelters also can assist families in euthanizing pets after an owner dies, if that's the person's desire.

Mackie said SpokAnimal staff will even live in a person's home with the pets until the animals die. For example, she tells of a woman with six cats who wants them to stay in her home after she goes to a nursing facility or dies. In exchange, the staff member gets free rent and SpokAnimal gets a stipend to provide food and vet care for the animals. Occasionally, people will donate their estates in exchange for pet care.

Mackie doesn't see this as going above and beyond for pets and their owners. Instead she sees it as a way to actually help her staff.

"We have lots of staff members who are in rental houses," she said. "This is a chance at stability and perhaps setting money aside to buy their own home maybe."

Chance, a year-old pit bull mix, ended up at the Spokane Humane Society last month when her owner unexpectedly died.

"The kids were running around trying to take care of everything, there was the confusion that accompanies an unexpected death," Executive Director Dave Richardson said.

Fortunately it didn't take Chance too long to find a home. Richardson said it's difficult on pets when their owner dies and that planning for their future makes transition easier.

"Our four-legged kids miss us just as much as our two-legged," he said. "They shut down, quit eating, are mopey and sad. It's a reoccurring theme in Hollywood but it's real life."

SpokAnimal's succession program is called Guardian Angel. Participants are asked to fill out an in-depth pet profile, outlining daily routines, food, favorite toys and other specifics that can help the group find a compatible, comfortable home for a grieving

pet. Pet owners are asked to share the information and their wishes for the future of their pets with family, friends, the executor of the will and their attorney.

Spokane Humane Society's program is called Forever Friends and has similar requirements.

At the hospital, Alexander often asks patients if they have pets and if their will includes them. She does the same when she volunteers with hospice. She sees educating people about the need for pet wills as important work.

"So many people have never thought about it," she said, adding she has witnessed some ugly fights among family members over the fate of pets.

Besides having a will that includes her cats, Alexander is also included in a will of an elderly friend in assisted living. The woman has designated Alexander to inherit her cat Marshmallow when she dies.

"She's a prepared woman," Alexander said.

Richardson said he hopes more people start thinking about their pets' futures and consider making a legal will that includes the animals.

"Do your homework and research before," Richardson said. "It's definitely wise."