

Planning Ensures Dogs' Care When Owners Pass Away

Comprehensive estate planning should name dogs' caregivers in the event they outlive their owners.

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Leona Helmsley's \$12 million trust fund for her dog ensures she'll live out the remainder of her life resting comfortably in the lap of luxury. The Maltese, Trouble, will not be one of the many of pets left in limbo – facing possible euthanasia – after their owners pass away.

Every hour 50 companion animals are euthanized in the United States because their owners died and no arrangements have been made for their care, according to Amy Shever, founder of 2nd Chance 4 Pets, a nonprofit that seeks to reduce these numbers.

"What we're really trying to do is get people to think about this and act because a lot of people don't. They just assume that they're going to outlive their animals," she says. "After Sept. 11 there were 800 orphaned pets in New York City, and the average age of the pet owner who passed away was only 35 years old."

The number of people who set aside money to care for their pets after their death is growing, says Steven Baker, attorney and founder of an estate planning for pets informational website, www.estateplanningforpets.org.

"You've got organizations that are devoted entirely to doing estate planning for pets and creating awareness ... You see a lot more being done, especially in the last five or six years," Baker explains.

Trouble's \$12 million was left in a trust fund. Not all states allow pet trusts, although instructions for pet care may be included as part of traditional estate planning, and the first step involves establishing who will take care of the pet. But financial obligations can vary widely depending on the type of pet, age, and medical condition. Shever says she's seen people designate anywhere from \$2,000 to \$70,000 for pet care.

"Every person spends differently," she says. "There's a lot of moving parts when it comes to taking care of an animals such as pet sitters, emergency care or pet insurance ... If we can get more people to think about this we're obviously saving more pets."

-Heidi Hatch, Associate News Editor for DogChannel.com