

Providing for Your Animal Companions

Critical steps should be taken now to ensure that your animal companions will still receive the loving care that they are accustomed to and that the transition to a life without you will be as painless as possible should you become unable to care for them.

Emergency Plans

It is essential that you arrange for someone who can come to your home on short notice to visit your animals in the event of an emergency. The person you choose will need to be able to feed and provide fresh water for your animals, console them and take care of their needs until their long-term care has been arranged. Many people select a family member or a close neighbour who has a key to their home and is already familiar with their animal companions.

Vital Information Files and Cards

Make sure that vital information about each of your animals is readily accessible so that their temporary guardian can care for them, both during an emergency and while choosing the best new homes for them. At a minimum, you should provide a list of people to contact in the event of an emergency, along with the following:

- Your animals' names, ages and genders
- The name and location of their veterinarian
- Their diets, eating habits and feeding schedules
- A picture or two of each animal
- Insight into their behaviour: likes and dislikes, personalities, etc
- A description of their current lifestyle at your home; (Do they spend time in your backyard? Do they often ride in your car with you? Where do they sleep? What are their favourite toys?)
- A list of priorities that the caretaker should consider when looking for a new home
- Details of any medication that the animal needs
- Details of any pet insurance and microchip documents

Once a year, revisit the files in which this information is stored and make necessary modifications in order to keep the information as accurate and helpful as possible. Keep critical contact information – as well as information about where these files can be found – in your purse or wallet. In a highly visible location in your home, you should also place a sign indicating how many animal companions you have.

Someone You Trust

For many people, selecting the best permanent caretaker(s) for their animal companions is the most difficult part of estate planning. It is a good idea to name at least two candidates in case your first choice is not able, available or willing to take responsibility for your animals.

Everyone's situation is different, but the key factor in selecting guardians is trust. Choose people you trust to carry out your wishes.

Once you have selected guardians or are close to finalising your selections, we suggest that you complete your plans in consultation with your solicitor, who will be able to

advise you on a variety of options – including trusts and conditional bequests – that may vary according to your state of residence.

You may want to ask your solicitor to word your legal documents in a way that limits the powers or increases the responsibility of your animals' guardians. The following are some examples of clauses that you may want to include:

- Ensure that your animals will never be tested on, used for research of any kind or commercially exploited.
- Require your animals' guardian to carefully visit and inspect a prospective new home before relinquishing custody of your animals.
- Require the guardian to request a fee from potential new guardians or take other steps to ensure that whoever is seeking custody of the animals is not attempting to acquire animals deceptively with the ultimate goal of selling them to others who might exploit and otherwise harm them.
- Require that euthanasia be performed, if and when necessary, by a licensed veterinarian or an animal shelter worker only.
- Require that each animal visit a veterinarian at least once a year.
- State any other stipulations clearly and succinctly in order to ensure that your animal companions continue to enjoy the life that you want them to have.

Special Considerations

Sadly, horses, cattle, sheep and many other species retain commercial value even after death, which heightens the possibility that unprincipled people will try to acquire these animals deceptively or harm them for personal gain. Be sure to stipulate in your will or trust that your animals are, under no circumstances, to be used commercially or sold for commercial use in the future, whether they're alive or dead.

It is also important to consider your animal's life span and life expectancy when making your plans. Turtles, horses, exotic birds and many other animals have life spans of 30, 40 or even 50 years – and sometimes more. Many potential caretakers will be unable to make lifetime commitments to such animals. Choose their guardians with care in order to decrease the chance that they will be shuffled from person to person or fall into the wrong hands.

These are difficult but important choices. Now is the time to make them so you can protect your animals and provide for their care in the event that they outlive you.