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209 Oak Street, Hood River • 541-387-DOGS (3647) • <http://www.proddogs.org>
Mailing Address: 7741 Cook-Underwood Road, Underwood, WA 98651

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Opening the Closed Door – Strategies for Coping with Animal Hoarders

by: Carrie Allan

- Everyone who's worked a large case where large numbers of animals have been confined without proper veterinary care or sanitation can speak of the things they remember: the clutter: the mangy, flea-ridden, wheezing animals; the feces and corpses ground into the rug; the blackened ground that turns out to be made up of living and dead flies; and most of all, the hideous, sickening smell that gets into your clothes and hair and memory and seems like it will never come out again.
- ...the psychological blindness of hoarders, their sheer inability to see the reality of what they are doing and how they are living. Generally speaking hoarders do not intend to be cruel, and yet the conditions of the animals they keep is sometimes worse - and on a larger scale - than those hurt by the most deliberate kind of abusers.
- Frost and others have noted that part of what seems to drive many animal hoarders is a nesting instinct.....Within that nest - regardless of the often unsanitary, cluttered living conditions that are readily apparent to outsiders - the hoarder feels protected. When Frost interviews hoarders in their own homes, they don't notice the dirt and clutter and smell, he says. But interestingly, their reactions change once they've left the setting. "We'll take pictures of the house and show them to hoarders later, and in the office, and they have this startling reaction of 'Oh my god, I live like that?'" he says. Compulsive hoarding is a psychological disorder...
- Hoarders feel unable to stop collecting, no matter how detrimental it is to their own circumstances or those of the animals.
- The recidivism rate for hoarders who are left to their own devices without continued counseling and oversight is frequently estimated to be around 100 percent.

- ...what frequently happens after prosecution is all too predictable: The hoarder waits a while, and then begins collecting animals again, one at a time - the stray cat that show up on the back porch becomes three stray cats, who become six, who soon have free range of the home and often breed endlessly as the hoarder indulges her need to obtain or “save” as many as possible...the problem is that [hoarders] seem to be obsessed with avoiding death.
- These are very wounded people. Remember that having been hurt is one of the forces driving some people to gravitate to the world of animals, above and beyond the world of humans.
- Though large-scale euthanasia of hoarded animals is not always necessary, it is sometimes the most humane course of action...Because animal hoarding remains such a mystery, solutions to the problem have often involved treating the symptoms rather than the underlying illness.
- The less contact a hoarder has with the outside world and with the other people who inhabit it, the easier it becomes to slip into the fantasy one has created.
- The more understanding and empathy an investigator can demonstrate in his approach, the more likely he’ll be to make a real difference - both to the animals and to the person who is suffering the effects of his own delusions.
- For further information: the website of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding) contains a weath of information. Also worth checking out is the website of the New York City Hoarding Taskforce at Cornell University (www.cornellaging.com/gem/hoa_nyc_hoa_tas.html)