Who will care for your cat when you no longer can?

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What would happen to your cat if something happened to you? This is a question everyone who has a cat or any companion animal needs to consider. Just ask Peter Kuehne, manager of the Garden City RV Park, a residential RV park in San Jose. In mid May, one of the residents passed away leaving behind her three beloved cats, Mikey, Marmalade and Tigger, and no plan in place for their care. Fortunately, Kuehne and a number of residents stepped in.

Eventually, family members took Tigger, and Marmalade, the most stressed of the three over the loss of his owner, went to a neighbor who now is fostering him with the help of local feline rescuers. Mikey ended up at the Humane Society Silicon Valley (HSSV) in Milpitas where he is waiting for a new home. In the meantime, Kuehne is keeping tabs on him.

Mikey is waiting for a new home since his owner died

This situation of pets left behind without a specified caregiver is all too common, says Amy Shever, executive director of 2nd Chance4 Pets, a national organization headquartered in Los Gatos that provides both information and lifetime care solutions to ensure companion animals receive care after their owners pass on. Shever says that each year thousands of animals are euthanized in shelters and veterinarian clinics because their owners pass away, never having made plans for their pets' continued care.

To protect your companion animal should something happen to you, Shever encourages pet owners to identify caregivers who would be willing to care for your pet during an emergency or if you should die or become ill. You might even want to select two caregivers, in case something happens to one of your choices. Make sure to identify them in your will. You should also prepare written instructions detailing care for your pet. If you have several pets, make it clear if you want them to stay together. To ensure your wishes are followed, document the instructions and let others know where they are

Finally, establish a fund for ongoing care of your animal. Consider that the food, supplies and medical care for your pets will not stop if you are not here to pay for them. You might want to set aside funds to cover temporary or permanent care for your pets. Professionals who can help include estate planners, financial planners and life insurance company representatives.

Many animal guardians/owners now are setting up legal trust funds for their animals, in which the appointed trustee is tasked with monitoring the designated caretaker over time, ensuring that he or she provides adequate care for the pets. A trust must explain how you want to dispose of the remainder of the fund after the animal dies. "The Pet Plan and Pet Trust Guide," written by attorney and law professor Kimberly Adams Colgate provides a step-by-step, fill in the blanks guide to setting up a pet trust.

Regardless of whether you set up a trust or will, Shever points out neither will make a difference for the lives of your pets unless the "backup" caregiver is 100 percent committed. You need to check back with these caregivers every few years to make sure that they still are able and willing to take over the care of your pets should they outlive you.

As for Mikey who's waiting for his new forever home at the HSSV, he's a very friendly five-year old orange tabby. If you are interested in learning more about him, contact the Humane Society Silicon Valley at 408-262-2133 x 150 for the Adoptions Department. Also HSSV has a Pet Guardianship program that also will provide care for your animal should you predecease it. You can find about more about the program at http://www.hssv.org/donate_guardianship.html.

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