



Are you one of the roughly 65% of households in America that owns a pet? If so, chances are you consider your animal companion a part of the family. Yet many pet owners fail to account for their pets in their estate plans. In the best-case scenario, that omission can lead to confusion for heirs. In the worst case, animals may wind up in shelters, euthanized or abandoned.

“A lot of people love their pets as much as they love their children,” says Matthew Metos, vice president of Advanced Planning for Fidelity Investments. “So, it makes sense to consider taking the legal steps to provide for them in the event that they outlive you.”

Including pets in your estate plan can help you ensure that they will receive the care they need for the rest of their lives—and can give a pet owner some peace of mind.

If you choose to select a family member or close friend, then consider setting up a Pet Trust to make sure that pets continue to receive the necessary care for the rest of their lives. A Will may not be the best option for this task. In fact, Rachel Hirschfeld, the founder and co-chair of the New York County Bar Association’s Animal Law Committee, considers this option to be only barely preferable to leaving no instructions about your pets at all. “Leaving a pet in a Will is practically a death warrant for the pet,” she says. “They can’t hold their breath until the courts choose the manager of the estate.”

A Pet Trust is generally a much stronger option to consider. A Pet Trust is a legally binding arrangement that generally provides for the care of pets should the owner become incapable of caring for them. It lets the pet owner set up regular payments to the chosen caregiver that cover the expenses of taking care of the pets. Setting up a pet trust is much like setting up any other kind of trust. The owner decides how much money to put into it, chooses a trustee to oversee these assets, and lays out instructions for the use of the money—in this case, detailing how it should be used to care for the pets. These instructions can include such details as the amount and kinds of food the pets should have, their medical needs, etc. and should include the contact information of the current vet.

While some pet owners choose to select a close friend or family member to assume care of the pet upon the owner’s death or incapacity, doing so can place an undue burden. Another option is to select a rescue organization to take possession of the pet

and designate either a set amount to accompany the pet, or a bequeath a percentage of their estate to that organization.

Some legal experts recommend removing the “financial incentive” for an individual to accept the responsibility of caring for the pet for the rest of their lives. Over the years, Felines & Friends has accepted older cats from shelters only to learn that they were abandoned by the very person who was entrusted to provide them with a loving home. In other words, the person kept the money but not the cat.

Felines & Friends has been designated to accept cats upon incapacitation or death of their owners. In a couple of cases, the cats continued to provide comfort to their owners during in-home hospice care and then were brought to our cat hotel.

While these cats live in comfort with us, the ultimate goal is to place them into new homes with people similar to their previous humans. Sometimes, the new home is on a fixed income and the cost of future vet care is a concern. If the cat came to Felines & Friends with financial support, we can provide vet care, special diets and other supplies.

When considering how much money may be required to care for your cat for the rest of its life, you should assume a lifespan of 18 years and plan on at least \$1,000 per year. As cat age, the cost of vet care typically goes up.

For those readers who may not have an “estate” to speak of, leaving a clean vehicle to the organization is one option. For only a few hundred dollars a year, a small life insurance policies naming Felines & Friends as the beneficiary “payable on death” is an inexpensive option to provide for your feline companion.

It is our hope that pet owners who read this article with give some thought to planning, no matter your age. Each year, Felines & Friends is asked to take cats from family members or friends of someone who has become incapacitated or died, but did not make any provisions for their pets. This is a very sad scenario that can be avoided.

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