

When preparing an estate plan, don't forget about your pets.

Many clients worry about the care of their pets in the event of a medical emergency or a death. When a client brings up a concern about caring for a pet, the estate planning attorney will work with the client to address this issue in the client's Power of Attorney document, a side letter to a friend or neighbor, and usually in the client's Last Will and Testament.

If your estate planning attorney does not ask whether you own a pet during your meeting, be sure to bring up the topic if you have a pet and you have some concern about the pet's continuing care and even placement in the event of an emergency or death. Your estate planning attorney should be able to help you work out a contingency plan.

Here are a few suggestions:

1. Identify several emergency care providers for your pets who are willing to provide a temporary home or to visit your home regularly while a temporary home is located in the event you are not able to care for your pets. Do you have a "pet sitter" for when you travel? Or do you have a kennel that you regularly use? If yes, perhaps the pet sitter (or the kennel) could cover the situation in the short run. Your pet sitter (or kennel personnel) must be provided a means to access your home (perhaps by borrowing a key from a friendly neighbor?), should be familiar with your pet's feeding and exercise schedule, and should have information about the pet's medications and the name and telephone number of the pet's veterinarian. In an emergency, many veterinarians can arrange for temporary care or have an association with a kennel that will provide the temporary home for the pet until more permanent arrangements can be made.
2. Be sure to share this information about the emergency care providers and veterinarian with your family and close friends and neighbors. You might consider carrying this information in your wallet or purse. Think about posting a copy of the information near your pet's food supply or where you keep your pet's leash or other pet accessories. Inform your family, close neighbors and friends where this information is stored or displayed.
3. If you are elderly or have a serious medical condition and live alone, think about posting information about your pets near the front door so that emergency medical providers will be aware of the situation upon entering your residence.

Each of us should engage our family members, our neighbors and our close friends in a discussion as to what role any of these people are willing to play in caring for our pets in the event of an emergency. Once the individuals have agreed to be involved, be sure to keep in touch with these people so they are certain to remember their obligations. If you get a new pet, be sure to introduce your new pet to the emergency contingency team and inform the team members of any additional matters relating to that new pet. We are doing ourselves and our furry friends a great service by addressing this issue in the estate planning process.