According to the Animal Legal Defense Fund, animal hoarding is the number one animal cruelty crisis facing companion animals in communities across the country. Experts estimate that 250,000 animals—mostly cats and dogs—will suffer this year from neglect and abuse as a result of animal hoarding.

Unfortunately, many cases will go unreported or unnoticed until it is too late for the animals, who will perish. This is especially true for cats, whose voices may not be heard.

**An Issue of Catastrophic Proportions**

According to the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the number of reported cases of animal hoarding has more than doubled in the past four years. In fact, several cases have been reported this year in both Sarasota and Manatee counties.

**Profile of an Animal Hoarder**

According to Dr. Gary Patronek, founder of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium at Tufts University in Massachusetts, there are three “types” of animal hoarders:

- **Overwhelmed Caregiver Hoarder**—These people are more likely to be based in reality and become overwhelmed by the number of animals they take in.
- **Rescuer Hoarder**—Mission-driven individuals who are actively and compulsively acquiring animals.
- **Exploiter Hoarder**— Those who feel no empathy towards animals or humans and acquire animals to serve their own needs.

**Devastating Consequences**

Dogs and cats that are victims of animal hoarders often show signs of abuse, such as severe malnutrition, untreated medical conditions that include open sores, cancers and advanced dental and eye diseases and severe psychological distress. All too often, these animals will die.

Frequently, animal hoarders will fail to act on or even recognize the negative impact of this behavior on their own deteriorating health and mental well-being.

If you encounter an animal hoarder, keep in mind that his or her way of life, sense of values and even his or her belief systems may be extremely difficult to understand or accept. What you find deplorable, an animal hoarder may not even notice or find bothersome.

If you think someone you know is struggling with animal hoarding, here are a few ways you can help.

1. **Initiate a family or friend intervention.** An excellent resource for advice on conducting an intervention is Tufts University’s Web site: http://www.tufts.edu/vet/hoarding/pubs/famfriend.pdf.

2. **Speak with your local humane law enforcement department, animal services, animal shelter, animal welfare group or veterinarian to initiate their support.** Or contact social service groups, such as the Department on Aging, the Department of Social Services, Adult Protective Services and the Health Department. Also, visit Humane@aspca.org online and read, “Reporting Cruelty, Frequently Asked Questions.”

It is critical to broaden your knowledge, and educational Web sites can provide important clues and critical advice on both how to approach and work with the issue of animal hoarding.

In addition, support your local legislation. Rarely are animal hoarding cases prosecuted, because they fail to show the individuals’ intent to harm. Legislation that recognizes animal hoarding as unlawful should also enforce mandatory treatment for the condition.

Animal hoarding is escalating on state, national and international disaster levels, and every county is vulnerable. If someone you know or love shows signs of animal hoarding, please seek immediate advice and help before it is too late for both the animals and the hoarder.

The solutions are not simple, but they are attainable.

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*Cat Depot, one of the largest no-kill, nonprofit feline adoption centers in the nation, is dedicated to saving lives. Open seven days a week, Cat Depot is located at 2542 17th Street in Sarasota. For more information, call 941-366-2404, or visit www.CatDepot.org.*

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**FELINE FACTS**

By Shelley Thayer
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...Is It Becoming Epidemic?