

## What Happens When a Senior Can No Longer Care for Their Pet?

Candace Rotolo

Howard Cutler knows the joy that animals can bring to people. He has many fond childhood memories of his family's two beloved dogs and cats. After moving into a senior housing complex in Atlanta, Ga., Cutler acted on his love of animals and adopted a Shih Tzu named Ollie from a fellow resident who could no longer care for the dog. The pair was inseparable for seven years until advancing Parkinson's disease forced Cutler to move to an assisted living facility that didn't allow pets.

"He was my friend and my companion, and giving him up was very difficult for me," Cutler explains. As much as he wanted to keep little Ollie, Cutler knew he needed to rehome his beloved pet. He began looking among his neighbors in the senior complex to find a new owner. "Ollie was loved by everyone there, but I was worried that I wouldn't find the right person."

Cutler was fortunate to find the perfect fit in his friend and neighbor Nancy Markovich. "Howard was heartsick that he had to give up Ollie," she recalls. "So, I offered to adopt the dog and promised to take good care of him."

Ollie's veterinarian, Dr. Duffy Jones, says pets provide much-needed comfort and companionship to people of all ages, especially seniors. "The value that animals bring to people is amazing," he says. "I've seen older pet owners who are struggling financially choose not feed themselves so they can feed their animals. Their pet is the reason they get up in the morning."

But when aging pet owners like Cutler find themselves unable to care for their animals, rehoming is often the best course of action. "Most owners understand they're sick and their pet needs more care than they're able to provide," Jones says. "They want to make a plan for their pets; It's a real source of comfort."

### Senior Pet Owners Must Plan for the Unexpected

Jones encourages all pet owners to devise a succession plan for their animals long before one is needed. Having a "plan b" in place will give owners invaluable peace of mind and provide added security for their animal(s).

While [pet-friendly senior living facilities](#) do exist, there are rules and additional costs for residents with animals. Researching local long-term care options and their pet policies can be a useful part of planning for the future with a pet, but there is no way of accurately predicting what level of care an elder may need or guaranteeing that a certain facility will have availability when the need arises. Jones offers the following tips for creating a contingency plan for a pet.

- **Consider adoption.**

Ask friends and family who are familiar with the pet if they would be willing and able to offer the animal a new home. Those who interact with the pet regularly will be better equipped to

determine if the animal's size, personality and routine would fit well with their schedule and lifestyle. The sooner these discussions happen, the better. While evaluating prospective adopters, discuss the possibility of allowing the original owner to continue visiting with the animal. Even a monthly visit with a cherished furry friend can brighten up a senior's day.

- **Talk to a vet.**  
Veterinarians have many resources at their disposal and can often help rehome pets. No-kill shelters can be a useful option, and there are many non-profit rescue organizations around the U.S. that will assist older adults in finding new homes for their animals. Researching these options in advance is especially important in situations where there are no friends or family willing or able to adopt the pet should they need a new home.
- **Get the owner's input.**  
Be sure to let the pet owner have a say in the decision. Ask them who they would like to look after their pet. "In some cases, older people don't have a lot of family around and their friends are going through similar transitions. They worry about what will happen to their pets," explains Jones. "Animal owners are visibly relieved when we tell them we've found their pets a new home. It's not uncommon for them to cry."
- **Allow for a smooth transition.**  
Ideally, the current owner will be able to help the pet transition to its new home. The goal is to help the animal and new owner build trust and become familiar with one another incrementally. Try having the new owner come for extended visits with the pet, take over certain parts of the animal's routine (e.g., walks, feedings and play time), and care for it in the new home for short periods before full-time ownership begins. Small steps are easier on everyone involved compared to an abrupt change.
- **Put the pet's care plan in writing.**  
A senior's health and abilities can change very quickly, so gradually transitioning a pet to a new owner may not always be realistic. Planning for this possibility is important, too. Creating a detailed file on the pet can be very helpful for interim caregivers during emergencies and in situations where an animal must be rehomed permanently. Include information about the pet's daily routine, the type and amount of food they eat, likes and dislikes, any quirky behaviors they may exhibit, training commands or gestures the animal responds to, their veterinarian's contact information, basic health information, pet insurance policy information, and instructions for any medications and preventative treatments the pet receives. Keeping an updated file like this makes it much easier to maintain a degree of normalcy for the animal and provides prospective adopters with a comprehensive picture of their needs and personality.

Jones points out that euthanizing a pet should be the absolute last resort. "Some older people think that putting a pet down is best because the animal is so bonded to their owner," he admits. "We usually try to talk them out of it, explain that there are so many other options and then we work with the owner to rehome their pet(s)."

## When Is It Time to Rehome a Senior's Pet?

With so much research touting the physical and mental [benefits of pet ownership](#), Jones advises that older people keep their pets for as long as possible. Unfortunately, though, circumstances do change. If a pet or their elderly owner is living in a neglectful situation or experiencing a reduced

quality of life, then it is time to explore alternative options. It can be difficult to balance the health, safety and happiness of both the senior and their pet, but it must be done.

Jones sympathizes with family caregivers who don't know what to do with their elderly parents' pets—an all-too-common scenario. "For caregivers, the thought of taking care of a person and their pet can be overwhelming," he notes. "Sometimes older people haven't trained their pets well, which can amount to behavioral problems and unsanitary conditions. But what people don't see is that these animals mean so much to their owners. Separation often causes physical and emotional decline in both parties."

## Balance What Is Best for the Senior and Their Pet

Markovich has no regrets about adopting Ollie. She tried to make the transition as smooth as possible for him and his former owner. Cutler now receives the care and assistance he requires while Ollie gets the love and stimulation that dogs thrive on. Markovich inherited Ollie's food and water dishes from Cutler and even places them in the same spot in her apartment at the senior housing community. They take daily walks together and Markovich hopes she has kept Ollie trained to Cutler's standards.

Every month, Cutler gets to see his favorite companion when Markovich brings Ollie for a pet therapy visit at the assisted living community. "When he comes to see me, he's overjoyed," says Cutler. "When Nancy is ready to leave, he goes to her side to let me know he was happy to see me, but he is leaving with Nancy. I feel sad about that, but also happy that I was able to find a good home for him."

Markovich is equally grateful for the opportunity to help a friend in need and the loving companionship that a pet brings. "Ollie sits by me on the sofa, sleeps on my bed and we are thick as thieves. He is a true blessing for me," she remarks.

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