

Simon Trevelyan



Ensure Care for Your Beloved Pets

The majority of Canadian householders now own a pet. As pet ownership in Canada grows, so does the prominence pets play in our lives. As a nation, we are spending more on our animal companions. Canadians in 1998 spent \$536 million on their pets, up from \$521 million in 1997.

More than ever before, people are finding emotional connections with their pets. The traditional barnyard dog or cat has become the household pet and family member.

These trends mean that more people are considering their pets when they plan their estates. Increasingly, pet owners—especially those with no suitable family or friends who are able to properly care for their animals—are looking for ways to guarantee the well-being of their surviving pets.

Since joining the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) as Provincial Manager of Planned Giving, in 1998, I've received numerous calls from people concerned about what will happen to their pets in the event they predecease their pets. That is often the biggest worry elderly pet owners face in their declining years.

In response to this need, the BC SPCA started a program called the Pet Survivor Care Program. The program is designed to do four things:

1. encourage pet owners to consider the future of their pets as an integral

- part of their estate planning;
2. encourage estate professionals to discuss the issue with their clients when developing estate plans;
3. provide a solution for those who have no one suitable they can entrust with the care of their companion animals; and
4. provide financial support for the mission work of the BC SPCA in helping abandoned and abused animals.

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Here's how the program works. When a pet owner enrolls in the program, the BC SPCA gathers as much information as possible about the person's pet or pets: medical history, diet, personality, grooming requirements, favourite treats, and preferred home environment. This file is updated annually to reflect the pet's changing needs and character.

We ask the owner to describe what the society should look for in finding a new adoptive home; the owner may also leave a letter or message, which we will pass on to the adopter. We also provide a notice for the executor of the owner's Will, so that he or she knows to contact us when the time comes.

When the person dies or becomes permanently incapacitated, we collect and medically check the animal, then conduct a search for the right adopter. After the person is found, we ensure the owner's wishes will be followed by having the new adopter sign a special adoption contract binding him or her to the levels of care outlined by the previous owner. The BC SPCA also follows up with the new owner and visits the pet in its new home on a regular basis. If the conditions in which the pet is living are not as specified in the adoption agreement, the BC SPCA will take back the pet and find it a new home.

To register in the program, the pet owner signs an agreement with the BC SPCA, in which the society outlines all the services it will provide for the owner's pet and the procedures it will follow. Through the agreement, the owner agrees to make a minimum contribution to the society, either through his or her estate plan (usually the Will) or during the person's lifetime. The contribution will vary, depending on the number of animals enrolled and the level of services and support the animal will receive once it has been placed in a new adoptive home.

The contribution also includes a significant gift portion for the mission work of the society, calculated by subtracting from the contribution the program costs over the pet's expected life span. Given the new tax gift rules, it is expected that a tax receipt will be issued

for the gift portion. Two of the program options also provide for temporary foster care for pets during the hospitalization or temporary incapacity of the owner. This means owners don't have to lose their pets if they are unable to care for them for a period of time.

Jim Stark, the first pet owner to register in the program, contacted me when he only had a few months left to live. He was desperate to find a good home for his two cats and was prepared to leave the BC SPCA his small estate with the understanding we would do all we could to keep his two cats together and find them a good home. Mr. Stark had no family and no one who could care for his pets. His two cats were his whole life; he wasn't going to find "peace of mind" until he had made provision for their well-being.

I visited Jim and met his cats: Tammy, an affectionate 21-year-old tabby, and Minou, a terrified one-year-old stray. In that meeting I was able to assure Mr. Stark that we would find his cats the right home. Shortly after, I met

with Mr. Stark and his lawyer; I was able to supply them with language for the Will that would cover the agreement.

Mr. Stark died a few months later and we immediately took Tammy and Minou into our care. Tammy, who had a serious liver problem, received treatment at the SPCA animal hospital. We then started our search for a good adoptive home that would take two cats.

Because the BC SPCA adopts out thousands of animals each year, we have a vast pool of potential adopters. Within two weeks we had found a couple prepared to adopt the kitties. The cats were very fortunate; they had a wonderful new home where Tammy lived to the ripe old age of 24 and Minou gradually learned to come out of her shell.

Wherever Mr. Stark is now, he's smiling. Through his estate plan, he was not only able to leave a gift to the BC SPCA to help abandoned and abused animals, he was also able to ensure his beloved companions would enjoy a good home.

We ask that you encourage your clients to consider their pets when discussing their estate plans in future. Our free booklet, "If something were to happen to you, what would become of your pet?" outlines some of the basic steps pet owners should take and the different options they should consider.

If you are interested in receiving copies of the booklet or finding out more about the Pet Survivor Care Program and other options available to pet owners, please contact one of our regional Planned Giving Representatives. ▲

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