

# Rescued from Squalor

A house full of dogs provides a glimpse into the delusional world of animal hoarders

BY CARRIE ALLAN



The blue lights of a sheriff's black cruiser blaze through the early spring drizzle, flashing a signal of caution to any cars approaching the modest, ranch-style house on this rural road in Preston, Miss.

Such passersby are infrequent; the road is isolated, the piney woods around it stretching into the distance. But if you were to be driving by this morning, you would see a small woman—middle-aged, blond, perhaps once pretty—standing in the driveway between two officers from the sheriff's department. She is crying, pleading with them. Her face is crumpled and exhausted. The officers have their hands on her arms, restraining her.



ALL PHOTOS: KATHY MILAN/THE HSUS



Mange had caused many dogs to lose their fur; some had scratched and bitten themselves raw in their attempts to stop the itching. Eye infections were common.

Like a river moving around a boulder in its path, a half dozen grim-faced emergency responders in dark blue rain jackets and rubber boots divide and trudge past the officers, heading toward the woman's house.

If you saw this from the road, from a distance, what would you feel? Confusion? Pity for the woman, who is crying as though her heart might break?

Look again: Several loose dogs circle around the front yard, wandering onto the road. More dogs move slowly about in pens in the side yard, some peering out from ramshackle hutches of plywood. The only sounds are the rain, the low voices of the officers, and barking—some close by, other howls fainter, farther away, from the woods behind the house.

Many of the dogs don't look quite ... right. From a distance, it's hard to say why.

Come closer. Get out of your car. Wear shoes you don't care about; every few steps, there are piles of dog feces. There is also trash everywhere, and shoddy fencing made of plywood and rusted metal wiring, and a busted-up sofa in the driveway that has been mauled and shredded by the dogs. Chunks of its yellow, weather-stained foam litter the yard.

The sheriff has opened the plywood gate to allow the responders deeper into the property. As they pass the officers and the woman they're restraining, she says to them in a low, choked voice, "Please, go away."

But the responders here today—from The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), United Animal Nations, and the Mississippi Animal Rescue League—have a job to do, and that job requires balancing their pity for this woman with pity for the animals she's been keeping. Up close, their need is clear: There are more dogs in a front pen, thin, mangy dogs slinking around nervously, many with eye infections, some with open wounds, many with limbs that look bloody and scabbed—a sign that their skin has become so itchy from mange that they're chewing on themselves to try to make it stop.

Their discomfort is hard to witness, but there are signs of even more dismal fates. In the backyard, where more dogs are penned, a strange fragment catches the eye; its flash of white stands out against the brown of everything else. It's partially embedded in a pile of feces, but on second glance it's not hard to identify: It's part of a dog's jawbone, the teeth gleaming up from the mud.



The HSUS responders who helped in Mississippi had come directly from Tennessee, where they had assisted the Grainger County Humane Society in removing 120 cats from a dilapidated home.

From one of the pens, another small pack of nervous dogs watches the goings-on. The water in their kiddie pools, seemingly intended to serve as drinking stations, is dark green and slimy. But the most unsettling thing in this pen is a dead dog, its body wet with rain. It's obviously been dead for some time. Something—the other dogs? the rats running freely around the property?—has eaten most of its back legs and face away. Its fleshless muzzle is agape, the sockets of the eyes empty.

Some of the responders are putting on respirators now, preparing to enter the house.

### Good Intentions Gone Wrong?

Sheriff James Moore has been monitoring the situation here for several years. But until this spring morning when he served the warrant, even he hadn't been inside the house.

A new sheriff for Kemper County, Moore met the homeowner for the first time while campaigning in 2008. "She expressed a lot of concern about what kind of sheriff I would be in terms of protecting the dogs," he says. For several years, she has been running a rescue group out of

this property. Her group even had nonprofit tax status and a profile on Petfinder.com.

But after Moore began receiving complaints about the conditions of the property and the animals, he made it a point to speak with the homeowner more frequently and realized how misleading their first interaction had been. "The best thing that could have happened to those dogs was being taken away from her," he says.

The woman would also pay visits to the sheriff—ironically, to complain about her neighbors—that served as a pungent, visceral clue to Moore and his officers that something was seriously wrong. "Her smell would be in the office for days, and anything she brought or mailed to our office smelled like the house, too," he says.

Moore is the first person into the house this morning, securing the site and ensuring it's reasonably safe for animal handlers to enter. But even years of seeing—and smelling—what it was like on the outside did not adequately prepare him. "When I opened the door and saw what I saw, I could not believe it," he says.

The outside of the house is bad enough, with the poop and the trash and the mud, but at least the yard gets the

benefit of sunlight and occasional rain to wash away some of the nastiness.

Indoors, though, the droppings have stayed where they fell—the primary reason for the rescuers' respirators. The devices don't protect their eyes, though, which water upon exposure to the gases emanating from years of built-up feces. Their feet squish into what should be solid flooring but is instead covered in several inches of trash: nutritional supplements and soda cans and bags of dog food and potato chips and white bread—all of it mixed with poop.

Everything is covered in a layer of brownish grease, and there are dogs everywhere: little dogs in crates, a mama dog nursing puppies, other puppies blinking listlessly under reddish warming lights, hairless adult dogs roaming freely around the house, stopping now and then to scratch themselves furiously or lick open wounds. At least eight dogs of varying breeds are in the master bedroom, scabbling underneath the bed and peeking out at the rescue teams. A mostly hairless dog hides in the bathtub, another one cowers behind the toilet near an overturned canister of Comet, and several puppies curl up be-

### **Coping with Hoarders: Tips for Animal Welfare Groups** **How to take on a collector without breaking your budget—or your staff**

Animal hoarding situations exist in communities across the country, and they cause untold amounts of suffering for the animals involved. The more severe cases can be a threat to human health, both for those living nearby, and the hoarder herself, who may be incapable of recognizing the filthy conditions she's living in as a risk to her own well-being. When shelters intervene, they do a tremendous service for the animal and human victims of this complex phenomenon.

But a large hoarding case can create problems for shelters as well, says Joyce Garrity, executive director of the Dutchess County SPCA in Hyde Park, N.Y. "Animal hoarding—if the shelter doesn't prepare adequately in advance and become proactive—can really put a shelter in jeopardy, both with a huge space crunch and financially," she says. Planning ahead and being proactive, so that your staff is prepared for the short- and long-term implications of taking on a hoarder, is absolutely essential.

The Dutchess County SPCA has successfully handled multiple hoarding cases over the past decade. The roots of the organization's success lie in years of preparation and education—both internal and external. "A lot of organizations that do well with their hoarding cases and other abuse cases are big organizations, but we're small," says Garrity. "We really represent the majority, and so I feel if we can do

it, hopefully we can inspire others to know that they can do the same."

Garrity took her desire to inspire on the road this year, when she and Jami Landry, the shelter's senior humane law enforcement officer, co-presented an excellent workshop on handling hoarding at The HSUS's Animal Care Expo in Nashville, Tenn. Here are some of their recommendations for how shelters can prepare to take on the challenge of a major hoarding case.

**Don't be a meanie.** Hoarding situations often start small and gradually grow into major animal disaster areas. And it's when they're in the not-that-bad stage—when officers have seen evidence that more animals are arriving, and can tell the owner is beginning to struggle—that's the time to start intervening. But that's often a time when the conditions aren't dire enough to merit legal intervention, so it's vital to approach the owner in the spirit of sympathy and helpfulness.

"Many of the people who went into this went into it with a good heart, so our approach is never one of storm trooping in and acting aggressively," says Garrity. "We build up relationships because we want to be allowed onto their property, we want to be able to offer them assistance. In many of these cases it's a matter of reaching out to them and offering them opportunities to cut down on the population and to be responsible

... offering them spay/neuter opportunities, opportunities to voluntarily surrender animals. Building a relationship with the hoarder is important, treating these people with respect rather than as public enemy number one. They always say you catch more flies with honey, and it's really true."

#### **Be prepared to take legal action.**

Treating people with respect, and understanding that hoarding is usually caused by mental illness, is key to an effective approach. But when the approach doesn't work and the problem is clearly causing animal suffering, you need to be ready to use the law to get results.

"If we encounter a situation where it does fit our animal cruelty laws and we are able to charge them with a crime, we always do it," says Landry, "because even though the person isn't necessarily doing this intentionally to harm the animals, that's the only way we're going to be able to get them help that's going to benefit both themselves and the animals in their care."

Jail time is not what the Dutchess County SPCA typically wants for the hoarders it takes on. In fact, under an informed district attorney, an effective prosecution can ensure that the hoarder will stay out of jail—under the condition that they reduce the number of animals in their possession and seek counseling. "I know a lot of people are hesitant to charge them because they

neath the sink. Above them on the countertop, folded into a stack of dirty laundry, is a tiny, filthy, dead puppy.

### All Too Common

While this case seems extreme, it's not atypical. And it's the second time in less than a week that HSUS responders have been called to assist in a hoarding case. By the time they reach Mississippi, they've already been on the road for days, driving here directly from Tennessee, where they helped remove 120 cats from a home in similar conditions.

According to the authors of the recent book *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, authorities identify between 700 and 2,000 new cases of animal hoarding nationwide each year. "Because only the most severe cases get reported," write Smith College psychology professor Randy Frost and Boston University School of Social Work dean and professor Gail Steketee, "this is undoubtedly an underestimate."

Frost and Steketee describe the phenomenon as a severe version of a more general object-hoarding mentality. From their research, they've found most animal hoarders

feel like they're punishing someone who isn't intentionally harming the animals, but it's really better for them as well," Landry says.

### Educate key players well in advance.

Did you notice that adjective in front of "district attorney" in the previous tip? *Informed*. A small word that can make all the difference in how your cases get treated by law enforcement, prosecutors, and the media. And it's up to you to make sure that education happens.

When Garrity started as executive director of her shelter a decade ago, she immediately started building relationships with the local sheriff's department, and by listening to and talking with the officers there, she has created an invaluable supporter. "They don't have any extra officers to spare to go out on the road to investigate animal cruelty, and certainly animal hoarding complaints," she says. "So they are more than happy to have our officers assist them and to help us in any way." If your relationship with local law enforcement and district attorneys isn't what it could be, set up a meeting and open a dialogue—then make sure to demonstrate that your humane officers and your organization are worthy of that relationship and of their trust, Garrity advises.

That goes for developing relationships with the local media as well. Informing the community about what

you do should ideally begin long before you go through trial by fire during a major seizure. If you've developed a reputation as a trustworthy group, if people understand your role in the community, you won't have to work as hard to explain your intentions and needs during a major cruelty case.

**Know who your friends are.** If you suddenly have to take in dozens of sickly animals, what will you do? Will you have the space? The staff? The sanity?

All three can get a boost if you have relationships in place before you have to bring in the animals. If you develop good relationships with other shelters, with rescue and foster groups, and with community-minded veterinarians, you'll find that you already have a strong support network in crisis situations and can take advantage of resource sharing.

"It's important to cultivate that group ahead of time, so that you're not running on emotion when it happens," says Garrity. If you have to punt at 11 p.m. on the day of the seizure, or try to find partners after you've been up all night removing 70 fractious cats from a falling-down home, the agreements aren't going to be as strong, and it will be harder to ensure that your bases are covered. In those cases, Garrity says, "you tend to make agreements with people out of—I'm trying to think of a word other than

'desperation,' but desperation really is the word."

### Remember that other agencies can play a role.

Sometimes the health department or code enforcement can be your best friend when you're dealing with an uncooperative hoarder. Some hoarding situations can threaten the stability of a building, or can result in such a buildup of feces and an infestation of pests that they're a threat to human health—of the resident, but also of neighbors. In some cases where prosecution for animal cruelty isn't viable, improvements can be made through other means.

Dutchess County SPCA works with adult protective services all the time, and with child protective services as well, says Landry. "There was at least one instance where we discovered mentally disabled children who were living in horrific conditions through a hoarding investigation," she says. "No one was aware that these children were even in the residence, but investigating hoarding often leads us to finding humans in jeopardy as well."

As with your collaboration with other animal welfare groups, it's smart to get these relationships in place before you need them. Hoarding is a complex issue, and it often takes an interagency approach to bring a case to a satisfactory close.



HSUS field responder Rowdy Shaw carries an armload of puppies away from the filthy home where they were found.

“are female, well over forty years old, and single, widowed, or divorced. Cats and dogs are the most frequent animals hoarded, and the numbers vary widely but average around forty, with a few cases of well over one hundred. In about 80 percent of cases, dead, dying, or diseased animals can be found on the premises.”

Many people who hoard inanimate objects collect things that others wouldn't see as particularly valuable: newspapers piled into stacks that fill rooms, CDs, books, canned goods, clothing, stuffed toys, small plastic containers—all of it justified by some need the hoarder cannot always articulate, but which has come to define his existence. Adam Parascandola, director of animal cruelty issues for The HSUS's Animal Cruelty and Fighting Campaign, recalls a case from a previous job when he seized neglected cats from a home so overwhelmed with junk that the property was condemned and the owner forced to move. When Parascandola returned to check the humane traps he had set to catch the cats hiding around the house, the owner was there, packing garbage into bags—not to throw away, but to carry to her new residence. “It was literally, like, trash,” he says. “We tried to tell her, ‘That's trash; you don't need to take that to your new place,’ but she just didn't understand.”

Animal hoarders, on the other hand, don't just collect trash. They collect lives—often animals who need help, who've been abandoned or given up at shelters and need a caregiver. But hoarders have a blindness that keeps them from recognizing when their own need to collect crosses a line, when their resources can't provide for the number of pets they've taken in. In cases like the one in Preston, many hoarders also fail to spay or neuter the animals they have—leading to more breeding and ever-escalating pressure on scant space, time, and money.

The psychology of hoarding has often been linked to obsessive compulsive disorder, but more recent research indicates it's not clear where hoarding falls in a spectrum of possible pathologies.

“The trend over the past two decades has been to more readily label hoarding as a disease,” writes Northeastern University sociology professor Arnold Arluke in *Inside Animal Hoarding: The Case of Barbara Erickson and Her 552 Dogs*. But, he adds, “attempts to do so have been disappointing

because many hoarders do not fit so neatly into various diagnostic labels.” Hoarders' failure to recognize the filth of their surroundings or the suffering of their animals supports the theory that they are delusional. Their inability to stop harmful behavior mirrors the psychology of addiction. The traumatic or neglectful childhoods experienced by many hoarders push them to trust animals more than people—a way of thinking common to attachment disorders.

And while the typical image of an obsessive-compulsive hand-washer may seem hard to align with the squalor of hoarders' homes, many of those homes contain, among the chaos, signs of desperate attempts to maintain order. HSUS field responder Rowdy Shaw recalls one hoarder's home where “downstairs, there were thousands and thousands of Mountain Dew cans, but then upstairs, she had on the wall this nice, long wooden rack of all her cassette tapes, each still wrapped in the original plastic and all alphabetized,” he says. “It's very strange that you can live in urine and feces up to the wall outlets, and you can't even breathe in the house, but you find these signs” of attempted organization.

Some hoarders are regular multiple-pet owners who become overwhelmed due to unexpected changes—loss of a job, for example—while others are exploiters, whose psychological model runs closer to those we call sociopaths. But it's a third category—mission-driven animal hoarders—that makes up the majority of cases, write Frost and Steketee. Their behavior represents “an attempt to love that winds up destroying its target.”

These hoarders often feel they have a special connection to animals. The irony often seems like a perverse joke to the emergency responders and shelter staff called in to save animals from people who, even as dead cats and dogs are being carried from their homes, still maintain their belief that they alone know what's best for them.

### Sweet Surrender

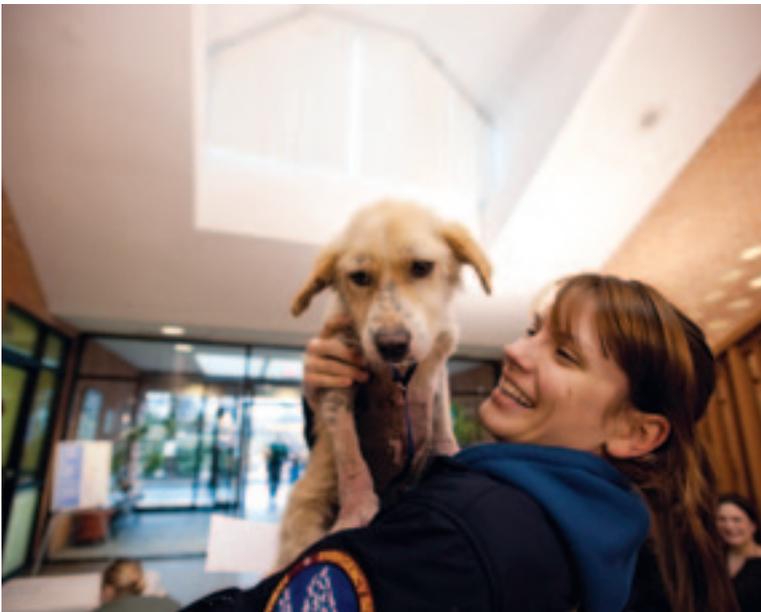
The animals, apparently, feel differently. Almost as soon as the HSUS emergency response rig opens its doors, revealing rows of scrubbed-down stainless steel caging and heaving an antiseptic breath over the fetid landscape, one of the loose dogs on the property runs onto it, finds a towel of her liking, and curls up on it, ready to leave.

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## animal hoarding



Some dogs in the Mississippi home had been breeding, exacerbating an already overcrowded situation with the addition of new puppies.



Rescued from the muck, this dog traveled north with field responder Karla Goodson and the rest of The HSUS team to receive medical treatment and rehabilitation from the Washington Animal Rescue League in the nation's capital. Many large-scale rescues would not be possible without the help of shelters that take in the animals, treat them, and place them with new families.

She has to wait a while. By the end of the seizure, the property's estimated 70 animals will turn out to total 181. Most of the dogs aren't aggressive, but they're unsocialized and nervous about being handled. Rounding up the ones in the pens—some of whom, despite their bad condition, can still run fast—takes kindness, skill, and time. Each animal has to be documented for court; this time-consuming process involves photographing the area where the animal was found, and then the animal himself from multiple angles in order to capture his physical condition.

By midafternoon, the steady rain has turned the grounds into a muddy poop soup, and the teams of responders are soaked and filthy. They have removed scores of dogs, and many more are still waiting.

To get to the dogs in the main pen in the front yard, the rescuers have to use wire cutters, a scene made more bizarre by the tiny audience watching them from inside the still-shuttered house: Dozens of rats are peering out the window and seem to be wondering if there might be a space for them on the rescue rig, too.

The animals' owner is no longer on the property. After refusing to calm down, she has been arrested for disorderly conduct and taken away. It's a minor infraction, and she'll be out of jail tomorrow. But later in the day, Parascandola goes to see her. He's hoping to get the thing that rescuers pray for in these cases: legal custody.

A major hoarding case takes tremendous resources—people to rescue the animals, veterinarians to evaluate and treat them, a place to hold them safely and humanely while the case progresses. Moore and Debra Boswell, executive director of the Mississippi Animal Rescue League, have worked for nearly nine months to plan this seizure, agreeing in the end that they'd need outside help.

It's difficult for any local agency to handle such a case on its own, says Parascandola. Many shelters are already overwhelmed, and the abrupt arrival of scores of animals can force them to euthanize healthy, adoptable pets in order to make space for sickly, skittish hoarding victims—a terrible choice, and one that sometimes prevents shelters from intervening in hoarding situations.

In many hoarding cases, shelters must hold animals for long periods as the owner fights the charges in court. If local laws don't require the owner or the state to cover costs, shelters may spend tens of thousands of dollars to house and feed the victims—a massive drain on already limited resources. But if owners agree to surrender the animals, they can be treated, evaluated for adoption, and placed into new homes quickly.

In the visiting area of the jail, Parascandola made his case. "She asked first if she surrendered the animals, would that prevent her from being prosecuted? And I said 'No, absolutely not.' And then she said, 'Well, then why should I surrender them?' And I said, 'For the dogs. They need to get out and into a better situation.'"

Whether it was due to Parascandola's plea—or simply because she couldn't afford to pay the bond required to cover the costs of holding the animals—the woman did everyone a favor: She surrendered all but three; later, a court ruled that even they should not be returned to her. That means that the 181 animals taken from the property can be distributed among shelters that have offered to help, and placed into new homes. It means that when scores of nervous, hairless, shivering dogs are driven away from the prop-

perts have estimated the recidivism rate for hoarding at close to 100 percent.

Talking to a hoarder, says Boswell, is almost like speaking another language. Their denial can be difficult to penetrate. "If you haven't dealt with them and aren't experienced, they can sound like they're making sense," she says.

Hoarders will often respond to a list of concerns with a list of excuses. In conversations with Parascandola and the sheriff, the Mississippi woman claimed that others had

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erty in the evening, they have seen the last of this place—a place where they came to be rescued, only to be neglected, starved, and allowed to get sick. It means the end of false hope, and the beginning of the real thing.

### The Prosecution Problem

For the animals, it's the start of a new life. But for the people who worked so hard to save them, it's not the end of the case. Despite copious evidence provided by the onsite team and by Moore's office, at press time—some six months after the seizure—the local prosecutor had not yet brought cruelty charges.

This outcome is far too frequent, often stemming from the pity that prosecutors and law enforcement feel for people who are sometimes portrayed—and who may present themselves—as confused but well-meaning motherly types who just loved animals too much.

Under criminal law, a perpetrator's intent is significant. Establishing intent to commit a crime typically involves proving someone knowingly took actions that would result in an illegal outcome.

In the case of hoarders, the issue of intent is muddy at best. A reasonable person can foresee the consequences of taking in animal after animal without an accompanying increase in resources. But most hoarders do not make this connection. And yet, as Arluke writes in *Inside Animal Hoarding*, the outcome "can be more disturbing than incidents of deliberate cruelty toward or torture of individual animals. Often, [hoarding] affects many animals kept for months or even years under conditions of horrendous deprivation and suffering."

It's a paradox at the heart of the hoarding phenomenon: The behavior is driven by sickness, and those who suffer from it deserve some sympathy. But the very fact that it is a psychological disorder makes prosecution all the more critical—because without it, the hoarder will almost certainly begin collecting animals again; some ex-

dumped dead dogs on her property, that some of her animals had been kidnapped and then brought back infected with mange. In her mind, none of the conditions seemed to be her responsibility. (According to one of Moore's officers, she even seemed to believe that the scores of rats running around her property were rabbits. "I've never seen rabbits with such long skinny tails," he says.)

Boswell wants to see charges brought. "It's not that we want to see her in jail," she says, "but that's the control." Prosecution is often the only way to ensure, via conditions of sentencing, that a hoarder will not regress. If a person's freedom is made conditional on not owning animals, that stipulation can sometimes effectively penetrate the layers of denial. It is often the only way to get hoarders to stop.

For Moore, who'd never dealt with a hoarding case before this one, the experience has been eye-opening. He wants the case prosecuted as much as anyone does. And he's already had a frightening glimpse into how thoroughly hoarders misunderstand how much their behavior hurts the animals they claim to love—and how important it is that they be held accountable, in spite of their illness.

Since the seizure, he says, he's already heard that the animals' owner has moved toward obtaining more pets. "Last thing I was aware of was that she was going to Petco in Meridian and trying to get some animals from them, and they told her they won't deal with her anymore," he says.

But that didn't stop her. Her blindness is so complete that she came to Moore himself—the man who's been hearing complaints for years, who's talked to her neighbors, who was the first to open the door of her house and see the filth and the clutter and the sick, mangy animals everywhere.

"She wanted me to write a letter saying she was not charged with any kind of cruelty charges, and so it's OK for her to receive animals again," he says. "I thought, 'She has to be kidding.'" 