

Pet Guardians: 5 Steps to Help Care for Man's Best Friend During the Unexpected

Amundsen Davis Estate Planning Alert
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In my senior year of high school, my great aunt had chest pains and went to the ER. Unfortunately, she died that same night, and my dad and his cousin were left with the task of finding a new home for Sherman, her beloved Standard Poodle. It all happened so suddenly, that we were in shock. My aunt left no instructions for Sherman's care and had not named a pet guardian. Luckily, my dad and his cousin were able to find a new home for Sherman quickly and a family friend was able to keep him until his permanent home was available.

Our family pets usually have a shorter life span than their human owners, but what happens if you become ill or incapacitated, or die before your pet. As a pet owner, you provide your pet with a home, and love, but also food, water and veterinary care. To ensure that your pet will continue to receive this care if something happens to you, it is important to plan ahead.

The best way to make sure your wishes are fulfilled is by also making formal arrangements that specifically cover the care of your pet.

To do this, take the following steps:

1. Work with an attorney to draw up a special will, trust, or other document to provide for the care and ownership of your pet as well as the money necessary to care for your pet.
2. It is possible to leave a dollar amount to a pet caregiver so that the caregiver you appoint has the funds necessary to care for your pet, and your pet can live in a loving home free from financial constraints. When thinking about how much money to leave for your pet, consider how much it costs to take care of your pet in a year. Take into account the extra costs of unexpected events like illnesses or injuries. You could then multiply it by the number of years you expect your pet to live.
3. You might also include a letter to your pet caregiver with your estate planning documents, where you indicate which veterinarian takes care of your pet, and where you keep your pet's medical records. You could also include other things that you think are important, such as training history

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and favorite foods or treats.

On a more practical level, here are some steps to prepare for the unexpected:

1. Be sure someone has access to your home. If a trusted friend or family member has your house key, they will be able to get into your home to take care of your pet. My dad and his cousin had a key to my great aunt's house and were able to go and feed Sherman and take him out.
2. Besides talking to your attorney and making sure there is a provision in your will and trust for your pet, talk to family members and friends about your wishes. Find out who is willing to adopt your pet if you die or can no longer care for them. If you cannot find someone to commit, see if someone will be willing to foster your dog. You should also make a list of preferred rescue organizations in your area where you would like your pet to go until a permanent home is found.

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