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FACT SHEET: ADOPTING AN ABUSED ANIMAL - WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Cruelty to animals takes many forms and can be found in virtually every community. When the laws to protect animals are effectively enforced, authorities often succeed in removing the victims of abuse from the people who had abused them. Frequently, local animal shelters offer such animals for adoption to responsible homes.

One of the major types of animal mistreatment which has come to light in the past several years is that caused by animal *collectors*. An animal collector can be described as a person who harbors large numbers of animals and who, either through ignorance or by design, neglects to feed and water them or provide them with medical care and other needs—to the point where they are starving, sickly, and dying.

When the facility of a collector is discovered by the authorities and animal rescue staff, large numbers of animals in deplorable condition are found on the premises. Animal collector cruelty cases are generally widely publicized, and peoples' hearts are moved by the sad circumstances of these animals. As a result, there is often an outpouring of offers on the part of animal lovers to adopt these animals. Such offers are generous and genuine, but are sometimes made for the wrong reason and without a real knowledge of the problems involved.

The Wrong Reason

Potential adopters must ask themselves: Do I really want a pet? Or am I reacting with a sympathetic humanitarian response to the atrocity of animal abuse? This is a basic question that has to be answered by anyone thinking about adopting an animal from this situation.

While feeling pity and compassion for these animals is a normal human emotion, it should not be the sole reason for wanting to adopt one of them. Adopting a normal animal—one with no problems—because one wants a pet, is in itself an enormous responsibility and entails a change in life-style. To enter into such an undertaking with an animal that is sure to have health, behavior, and emotional problems is something that must be given serious consideration.

Health Problems

Most of the animals rescued from an animal collector will have numerous medical problems, such as heartworm, for example, which will require long-term, special medical attention.

Behavior Problems

Many of these animals are not housebroken. Since they are not familiar with the routine concept of cleanliness, routine methods used for housebreaking may not be successful. Placed in households where two people work, these animals may never be housebroken. An un-housebroken dog requires an enormous investment of time and patience to unlearn bad habits and learn new ones. Depending on how long the animals were in the abusive situation and at what age they were placed there, their behavior problems may not be reversible.

Many abused animals are unsocialized and distrustful of people. Because they cannot be walked on a leash, particular care must be taken with the way they are confined when outdoors, for example, in

a run or a properly fenced yard. Should they escape, it will usually be extremely difficult to retrieve them. Many will react in fear and will try at all costs to avoid being handled by anyone in pursuit of them. Special techniques and equipment used by trained animal control personnel may be required in order to apprehend animals in these situations.

Temperament Problems

Many of these animals require much patience to accept their new owner as a friend. It is very disheartening to rescue an abused dog, expecting some gratitude, only to find that the dog hides, will not eat in front of you, runs when you call, and prefers to be left alone.

Extraordinary efforts are required to train and socialize them. It is a lifetime commitment. Some of this unsociable, fearful, depressed behavior can be overcome with time, but often these animals remain on the periphery of family life.

Eating Disorders

Abused dogs have often been deprived of food and water for long periods of time. As a result, many of these animals have eating disorders. Often they will gulp their food and then vomit, or refuse to eat in front of anyone. Many times they have been forced to eat rodents, cats, or other dogs to survive, so they must be carefully watched around other pets and children.

Summary

This information is not meant to discourage all potential adopters from offering their homes to an abused animal. It is provided so that people are aware of the potential problems that may occur. Although some of these animals can become good pets, a number of them remain intractable and anti-social in spite of heroic efforts. The commitment that must be made in terms of time, patience, training, and health care needs is often beyond what the average pet owner can manage.

After reviewing the facts and asking themselves hard questions, some people recognize that they really do not want a pet: they simply want to do something to help the animals. That is a good and compassionate response and everyone can act on it in many important ways:

- Give a gift of the heart by making a donation to the shelter that will house the animal while the court case is being adjudicated—or give a contribution to your own shelter to help the animals at that facility.
- Obtain from NYSHA a list of legislative bills that deal with animal welfare issues and write letters to legislators and to the media in support of those bills.
- Scrutinize all appeals for support from individuals who indicate that they are harboring large numbers of animals. Learn more about the facility in question. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Keep an eye out for animal abuse wherever you see it and report it to local animal shelters and police promptly; follow up on your reports to see if action has been taken.
- Do not condemn animal shelters for euthanizing animals for whom responsible homes cannot be found. They are forced to take this extreme action in order to prevent the kinds of terrible suffering that results when animals are confined for long periods in unacceptable conditions or fall into the hands of individuals who flagrantly neglect and abuse them in other ways.
- Most importantly, encourage your family, friends, and work associates to spay and neuter all their companion animals.