

Pets Allowed

Finding Housing for You and Your Pets in Uncertain Times

by Kari O'Brien

The impact of the current economic crisis and the rise in home foreclosures has led to an increase in abandoned pets left on the streets and doorsteps of shelters across the country. Overburdened shelters are turning pet owners away at the door, as they are already unable to manage the influx of homeless animals. Desperate pet owners, suddenly unable to handle the financial responsibility for their pets, or forced to move out of their homes and are unable to take their pets with them, seemingly have nowhere to turn. As a result, people are leaving their beloved pets behind in vacated properties or depositing them in the streets to fend for themselves.



Called “foreclosure pets,” this new wave of abandoned pets is most likely to impact cats, who are often viewed as more disposable than dogs. In some extreme cases pets are found in the home, long after the owners have left, in conditions too severe to mention. But most often, cats are simply left on streets to find food and shelter on their own.

Homeowners or tenants facing eviction often don't want to face reality and may wait until the last minute to worry about their pets. Our Companions' Animal Helpline volunteers, on the front lines of this trend, have been seeing an increase in calls for assistance where the need is economy related. “We're getting more calls from people facing eviction due to foreclosure than ever before. Most often, the need is urgent. We want to help pet owners but we need time to help them,” says Susan Linker, CEO of Our Companions.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, moving or no-pet landlord policies have always been among the top three reasons people give for abandoning their pets.

And when you have an economic and housing crisis affecting more and more people, the need for assistance only increases. But it doesn't have to be this heart-wrenching.

Alternatives to Pet Abandonment

Pet owners are not without alternatives to abandonment. Although it takes more effort, finding a new home that will accept your pet will ensure that he/she has a loving home in the future. Planning ahead and having a positive approach can produce an outcome that works for everyone. There are various resources within most states to help people find rental housing that is advertised to be pet-friendly, where landlords either accept all or some types of pets. We've enclosed a list of resources at the end of this article to assist you.

In addition to these resources, there are also constructive ways to make contact with landlords who might not openly advertise a pets-allowed policy. While some landlords completely forbid or restrict pets and will place their pet policy in their advertising, many others would gladly rent to responsible pet owners who are good tenants if they are asked and presented with a good reason to do so.

How to Locate Willing Landlords

Look for apartments without an advertised no-pet policy, which includes those that say they allow some type or size of pet. If a landlord is willing to accept a tenant with a cat, they are more likely to also accept one with a dog.

Also look for apartments in two- or three-family homes or detached homes, as the landlords can be more flexible about their pet policy. Large apartment complexes have fairly rigid guidelines and are unlikely to make an exception.

Demonstrate that you will be a good tenant, above all else.

Jessica Beganski, REALTOR for RE/MAX Precision Realty in Newington, Connecticut and an experienced landlord, suggests that you treat your initial meeting with the landlord as you would a job interview—organizing yourself ahead of time and coming prepared with your rental history, references, verification of renter's insurance policies, and anything else to make a good impression. "Show up on time, ask good questions, have a neat appearance, and really present yourself as a conscientious person," says Beganski. "If you do not represent yourself well, a landlord that is on the fence about their pet policy may suddenly find a no-pets policy to be a perfect excuse not to rent to you."

If you are in the process of foreclosure or eviction, you probably don't have a strong rental or credit history to promote yourself. In this situation, be honest with the landlord before a credit check is performed and explain why you faced foreclosure or eviction. A landlord will assume the worst, so if the reason is something beyond your control such as divorce, death in the family, health, or loss of job, disclose this to the landlord but also make clear the steps you've taken to rectify the situation.

Make them an offer they can't refuse.

Beganski warns against expecting a landlord to do the thinking for you. "You need to take the first step and present the landlord with an offer that will benefit them and you. Landlords can be persuaded by an opportunity to increase their income on a rental property," says Beganski.

Approach the landlord by saying, "Would you consider renting to me and my dog, Snoopy, if I agree to pay a non-refundable pet-deposit fee of \$350 or agree to pay \$25 extra/month in rent." Landlords may consider an additional fee either on a per month basis, or in the form of a refundable deposit to cover any damage to the property. Another way to reassure an apprehensive landlord is to pay for additional property insurance fees.

If your finances are tight, offer instead to help the landlord by doing some maintenance in exchange for the right to have a pet. Services such as snow removal and lawn maintenance are a significant part of a landlord's budget, so this could be a perfect trade-off.

In addition, offering to sign an addendum to the rental contract stating that any damages caused by your pet will be covered by you and/or adding an indemnification clause that will indemnify your landlord against any damage your pet may cause to personal property, is also a successful tactic.

Pointing out to the landlord that pet owners often make wonderful renters is another strategic move in convincing the landlord to rent to you. Renters in pet-friendly housing usually attract

more community-oriented residents, have a longer duration of occupancy as they are more apt to stay in an area that is welcoming to pets, and tend to be happy, well-adjusted people.

Demonstrate that you are a responsible pet owner.

In addition to proving your value as a tenant, Beganski recommends offering to show the landlord the following documents:

- Current vet records for your pet, which should include a recommendation letter from your vet, proof of spay/neuter, up-to-date vaccinations, licensing, and a history of regular veterinary care.
- Recommendations from previous landlords who allowed you to have a pet, neighbors, pet sitters or even pet trainers will also demonstrate your responsible pet ownership.
- Certificates from certified behavioral training courses to show your pet has completed certain training.
- A list of emergency vets in the area and a written plan in place in case of any disaster (fire, storm, etc.) to show the landlord that you have a plan and never intend to leave your pet behind.
- The care you give your pet will demonstrate to your landlord the care you will give the apartment.

Make your pet attractive.

Landlords are rightfully concerned that tenants will be irresponsible pet owners, leaving them to deal with property damage or finding an abandoned pet in the apartment after a tenant has moved out.

Bring a few photographs or a thoughtfully arranged scrapbook of your pet to your appointment so that the landlord can see that your pet is well-groomed and in good physical shape. You can also arrange a meeting between the landlord and your pet so the landlord will see your pet is healthy and well-behaved. Point out that your pet will be kept indoors at all times (unless being walked on a leash outside) and will never be left out or tethered on any patios/porches/balconies.

You may also want to mention that you have enrolled your pet in a day-care program or hired a pet sitter to come in once a day to ensure your pet will never be left alone for long periods of time (thus your pet will not cause a nuisance). To avoid any negative impressions about waste management, indicate that you are reliable in cleaning up waste after walking your dog, and/or disposing of used kitty litter in appropriate designated areas.

Protect Yourself By Being Honest

Beganski advises approaching the landlord with honesty up-front, "If a landlord asks you a question, give them a truthful answer." She also cautions renters to never be "sneaky" by trying to slip their pets into a rental property that either has a no-pets policy or one that is not made aware up-front of the pet situation. "Chances are, the other tenants will be more than willing to report you, and you will most likely be asked to leave immediately which will land you in the very problem you were trying to avoid in the first place." Not to mention the negative reference you now will have on record.

Once you have permission to have a pet on the property, remember to get it in writing so that in the event the property falls under new management, or the existing policies change, you and your pet ownership permission will be protected throughout the term of your lease.

Remember, it is a privilege to be allowed to rent with a pet, not an entitlement. Treat the landlord with respect, put yourself in his/her shoes and try to see the situation from their perspective. Landlords may harbor negative opinions with regard to pet-friendly policies due to negative experiences in the past. Make it your job to convince them that renting to a responsible pet owner can be rewarding for everyone involved.

Pet-Friendly Housing Resources

Check www.ourcompanions.org/pages/resources_links.htm and the following:

- Community apartment guidebooks
- Locate animal welfare organizations and shelters
- Animal control
- Real estate agents
- Property management companies
- Online searches

Other Considerations

“Dangerous” Breeds

Connecticut is not among the states to ban breed discrimination by insurance providers. If you have a dog who is considered to be on the “dangerous” breed list, a landlord may tell you that their insurance provider does not cover dogs on that list. It is perfectly legal for them to do so.

However, not all insurance companies automatically discriminate against certain breeds. And even in the event that the landlord’s policy does not cover any liability, you can still obtain a separate policy as a renter that would protect you and the landlord.

Service Dogs

Under the federal Fair Housing Amendments Act, landlords may be required to make reasonable accommodations or modifications for tenants with a disability, including waiving a no-pet policy. Emotional Support Animals and Service Dogs are not technically considered “pets,” but rather are considered to be more like assistive aids such as wheelchairs, which allow the tenant to enjoy full use of the property.