Advanced Planning for Your Pets
By Diane Choquette

My two cats are a great comfort to me. Since I live alone, they provide companionship, and it's a pleasure to care for them. Ziggy is eight and Callisto is twelve, and, at my age, I don't know how many more years I will be able to care for them. One or both could outlive me, and I want to do what I can to avoid them ending up in an animal shelter if I am incapacitated or die. Both cats have special diet needs, and Ziggy requires medication.

I have completed other end-of-life planning tasks, and now it's time to plan for my cats. Over lunch recently, my friend Molly and I discussed her plans for her cats. They provide a useful model, so I'm taking her lead.

Molly used to breed Persian cats and still has a few. On the inside of her front door, she has posted a sheet of paper with pictures of the cats labeled with their names. Listed on the sheet are the names and phone numbers of a few people willing to provide immediate care for her cats. Those people also know the location of a notebook Molly has prepared with information about each cat's diet, medications, veterinarian, and where the litter boxes and supplies are. I plan to create the same documents and post them on my refrigerator near my File of Life, which contains medical information about me useful to EMTs. If I am found unconscious or dead, EMTs in Benicia are trained to look at the refrigerator door for a File of Life. (The File of Life can be obtained from the Benicia Fire Department. I don't know if the Vallejo Fire Department also uses it.)

To ensure that the person who takes immediate care of her cats has money, Molly has put aside cash, along with her important documents, in a fire and water resistant Roloway bag. Finally, in her will she has designated the Cat House on the Kings, a cat sanctuary, as a beneficiary to receive a donation, even though they may not be willing to take her cats. If a cat was adopted from Cat House, it can be surrendered to them. Other cats and dogs are considered individually. The current charge for taking a surrendered cat is $5,000.

The Cat House on the Kings, in Parlier, southeast of Fresno, claims to be California's largest "no-cage, no-kill, lifetime cat sanctuary and adoption center." They place rescued cats and kittens into loving, permanent homes. They aim to provide a safe, happy, and healthy home for unwanted cats and kittens in a facility without cages. Additionally, Cat House spays and neuters cats to prevent overpopulation. You can read about them on their website, cathouseonthekings.com, and view videos on YouTube.

On their 12-acre property, Cat House has homes for senior and special needs cats. In addition to cats and kittens, they do take in puppies and dogs, though it appears their primary residents are cats. In addition to offering animals for adoption, Cat House solicits people to foster animals and to sponsor animals that are not likely to be adopted due to age or medical needs. In information for the executor of my trust and will, I plan to include information about Cat House as a possible final home for my cats.

Since I don't want the cost of the care of my cats to be a burden on anyone, and fees may be involved in rehoming, I'm thinking about designating funds in my will for their care. I could also set up a trust for them, but at this point, I don't have a caretaker to designate. Both the ASPCA (aspca.org) and AARP (aarp.org) have information on their websites about setting up a trust for your pets.

A trust can, for example, specify the particular foods your cat prefers and how often you want your pet to visit the veterinarian. A trust can take effect during your life, providing instructions for the care of your pets in the event you become incapacitated. You know your pet better than anyone else, so describing your pet's habits should be included in the instructions. According to the ASPCA website, "unless the trust instrument provides otherwise, the trust terminates upon the death of the animal, or upon the death of the last surviving animal covered by the trust." It's important to designate a remainder beneficiary for any funds remaining in the trust.