Hospice helps pets die peacefully at home

Trend recognizes depth of human grieving for four-legged family members

By William Porter, Denver Post Staff Writer

The black cat was dying.

His kidneys failing, he could no longer navigate the stairs in the house. Leaping onto the bed was impossible. Eating was a chore.

Finally, he retreated to a closet.

After 17 years, Laura Maynor knew it was time to say goodbye to Cinder. So on a warm Denver afternoon in June, she carried the cat into the backyard, talking to him about the times they had shared. Soon Keri Jones, the veterinarian who had provided home hospice care for Cinder, arrived with her kit.

And after a few minutes, Cinder closed his eyes and Maynor murmured goodbye.

"I would never use a vet's office for euthanasia again," said Maynor, a cat owner for 47 years. "Doing it at home is so much easier on the animal and owners. It was just such a calm, peaceful, loving kind of experience."

America is undergoing a cultural sea change in how we say goodbye to our pets. A growing hospice movement is teaching pet owners how to administer late-stage care to animals with terminal illnesses. Vets make house calls to euthanize pets in the comfort of the home; bereavement counselors work with humans grieving over their four-footed dead.

It's a long way from picking up a rifle and saying goodbye to Old Yeller, the old farm and frontier model. And it speaks to the increasingly complex relationship many people have with their animals.

We expect our children to outlive us. Not so with our animals. Yet we take them into our homes and hearts knowing this is the contract: We will come to love them, but we will lose them.

This translates to a lot of Kleenex: An estimated two-thirds of American households have pets, with more than 65 million dogs, 77 million cats and about 40 million birds. That doesn't count dozens of other varieties of animals large and small, hooved and clawed.

Attitude, affluence shift

A national leader in the animal-bereavement and hospice movement, the Argus Institute sits in a spacious headquarters in Fort Collins.

The institute, named after Greek hero Odysseus' loyal dog, was founded in 1984 on the notion that humans, just as they mourn relatives, mourn their
It has grown into a vanguard facility counseling about 1,300 people a year with a budget of about $256,000, a mix of state money and private donations.

"There was a recognition that veterinarians weren't being trained to deal with the emotional needs of the 'moms and dads' of companion animals," said Jane Shaw, the institute's director. "Since then, there's been an appreciation and understanding of the fact that people who love and value pets will grieve over their loss.

"It's a cornerstone of our work."

The expansion of animal-hospice and pet-oriented grief counseling services in recent years is rooted in an intersection of attitudes and affluence. For people without kids under their roof, pets often become surrogate children. This can lead to eyebrow-raising silliness - birthday parties for dogs? - but the profound emotional attachment is genuine.

"It's not surprising that people grieve so hard for their animals," said Ann Brandenburg-Schroeder, a Lakewood veterinarian specializing in home euthanasia since 2001. "Animals are often around you more than another person. They're with you like a second skin."

Adds Gail Bishop, the Argus Institute's clinical coordinator:

"Losing an animal that loves and adores us and can't wait to see us when we come through the door - we all had that love and acceptance when we were born, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get that back. An animal brings extraordinary value to our lives."

When people have the means and motivation to give their pets the best, perhaps it's only natural for them to treat animals as family - and that extends to life's end-stage.

This can spur questions about priorities in a world awash with human misery.

Bishop finds that a reasonable question, and offers a considered answer.

"I guess we all have different values," she said. "For me, some people should put their money into relief for Darfur or Katrina. Our values run from A to Z, and that drives our ambitions and emotions.

"But loss is loss."

The Argus Institute serves clients nationwide, although most hail from Colorado and surrounding states. Its Pet Hospice Program, a free service staffed by volunteers, operates within a 20-mile radius of Fort Collins.

Gabrielle Pearl is a client. Her family's 10-year-old beagle, Katy, has lymphoma. The dog's cancer went into remission after five chemotherapy sessions but returned two months later. Now it's just a matter of time.

"The hospice volunteers come once a week, check on..."
Katy and monitor her, and take the information back to our vet," Pearl said. "It really gives me peace of mind."

On a recent Sunday, Katy wasn't breathing well. Pearl picked up the phone, and a volunteer was at her house in 20 minutes. No charge.

"It's nice to know I don't have to panic and take her in every time," Pearl said. "The whole experience, difficult as it's been, has been amazing. We're really lucky."

Home hospice care allows animals to remain in a stable, familiar environment. It's comforting to all parties.

"It makes a huge difference," said Maynor, who five weeks after Cinder's death had to euthanize her calico cat, Tessa, who suffered from a tracheal tumor.

"Each individual, client as well as pet, is unique," said Christine Daigler, a Littleton veterinarian offering home euthanasia and hospice care. "I think a lot of clients, once they have a pet diagnosed with a terminal illness, don't want to go back to the clinic."

Hospice workers teach owners how to administer medicines to pets at home, just like people are taught to be caregivers to a dying parent.

Human-animal history

Studies of the 10,000-year interplay between humans and domestic animals indicate it began as a utilitarian exchange: Dogs could help in hunting, carry light loads and serve as early-warning systems around campfires. Cats rid granaries of vermin. In turn, they were fed and protected.

Over time, that relationship evolved.

"The research shows consistently that the vast majority of people who have companion animals consider them family members," said Christina Risley-Curtiss, an associate professor at Arizona State University's School of Social Work.

"Along with that, we are finally acknowledging that other animals are sentient, emotional beings who experience fear, pain, attachment, loss, etc.," she said.

Risley-Curtiss, who is a fellow at the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics in England, speaks from experience: Last spring, she chose home euthanasia for her 13-year-old greyhound, Rayne, who was terrified of the vet's office. "There was no way I wanted to subject her to that fear and anxiety if I didn't need to," she said.

Settings vary for euthanasia. Some people choose the living room, others the outdoors.

On the Argus Institute's west lawn is a grove of trees. It's a space where pet owners can spend the final minutes with an animal during euthanasia.

"Dog owners who spent a lot of time outdoors with their animal like the natural setting," Shaw said.

Cat owners often opt to use the institute's "comfort room," with upholstered chairs and sofas and muted
lighting. There's also a CD player: One young woman recently arrived with her terminally ill cat and a special piece of piano music.

**Tailored farewells**

Randy McCarty of Firehouse Animal Health Center in Denver has offered in-home euthanasia since entering veterinary practice in 1983.

Demand for the service has doubled in the past few years. Beyond its comfort, a home setting avoids the stress on people and pets of that final drive to the vet.

"Moving that whole process to the home serves so many different needs," McCarty said.

"But no two situations are similar," he said. "Sometimes it's a process a client wants expedited. Sometimes it takes 2 1/2 hours. People show me the animal's toys, share their memories, give the animal a last treat."

Euthanizing a pet at home costs about the same as in the vet's office - $100 to $250, depending on the animal's size and whether it is to be cremated. In-home service is not for everyone. Some folks can't bear the idea of a room in the house that will always be associated with the animal's death. "They want to have the last memories of the pet being alive and viable at home," McCarty said.

McCarty estimates he's euthanized more than 750 animals in his 24-year career. To this day, he often cries afterward.

"People ask me, 'Isn't this the worst part of your job?' Oddly, it isn't," he said. "You're providing that bridge as the pet passes out of this world, and sparing them pain in their decline.

"It's just part of what I do."

Brandenburg-Schroeder asks clients to set aside at least an hour for a euthanasia procedure.

Once the animal is settled, often on a lap or favorite blanket, the vet administers a series of IV injections: sedatives, then anesthetics, then sodium pentobarbital, the drug that takes the animal from sleep to the longest sleep. The drug sequence takes a matter of minutes.

"Many people feel overcome by the decision because they feel like they're playing god," Brandenburg-Schroeder said. "But animals aren't afraid of death.

"People ask me if I get depressed, but I don't," she said. "I'm always in the midst of great love, this tremendous bond between people and animals. That's what the tears mean."

Staff writer William Porter can be reached at 303-954-1877 or wporter@denverpost.com.