

ENDLESS LOVE, ENDLESS CARE: AN OVERVIEW OF PERPETUAL CARE PROGRAMS OFFERED AT VETERINARY SCHOOLS

When pet guardians die, their pets often sense the death, grieve the loss, and feel the loneliness that comes from the absence of their guardians. They may hide, moan, or howl when they realize the people who loved them are gone. Pets may even lose the desire to eat when they no longer see the ones they love.

Many pet owners try to minimize this loss and loneliness by making long-term care plans for their pets. They try to ensure that, in the event of their death or disability, their animals will not be neglected, abused, or abandoned. If unable to find a friend or family member to commit to caring for their pets, many pet owners look for an alternative solution that can help.

Some veterinary schools now offer “perpetual pet care” programs. These programs promise lifelong care for pets whose owners have passed away or become disabled. Using endowments set up by the pet owners, the schools provide shelter, food, and medical attention for the duration of the animal’s life.

Perpetual pet care programs are designed to benefit all involved. Veterinary students gain invaluable hands-on experience by treating the animals. Through the endowments, schools often receive added funding for education and training. The programs may also encourage older or those with chronic illnesses to feel more confident bringing pets into their lives.

Most importantly, pet owners gain the comfort of knowing that should anything happen to them, their pets will continue to receive the care they deserve.

Unfortunately, most of these programs are fairly costly. For example, the Perpetual Pet Care Program at Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine requires a minimum endowment of \$25,000 for the care of small companion animals. For large animals such as horses, the program requests a minimum of \$50,000 and up to \$75,000 if the pet has special needs. According to Kansas State, this money is used to “attend to all the emotional and physical needs of each pet until the appropriate and carefully screened adoptive home can be identified.” Often, any money left over at the end of the pet’s life is donated to the university itself. Other programs, such as The Peace of Mind Program at Purdue School of Veterinary Medicine, require similar fees.

Other veterinary school programs have more flexible payment options, but may provide a different level of care. At Texas A&M University, the Stevenson Companion Animal Life-Care Program bases its cost scale on the age of the owner at the time of enrollment and offers steep discounts for “paid-up” endowments. The TLC program

at the University of California at Davis will enroll a pet for \$1,000, but requires \$30,000 to care for the pet over its lifetime. These programs have the pets housed in a center among many other animals and have a changing group of caregivers rather than providing an adoptive home with individual attention. If an animal has belonged to someone all its life, it may find this experience traumatic.

As the demand for perpetual pet care grows, other veterinary colleges are taking notice. Spencer Faircloth at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine sees a great need for a program that can serve the many retired pet owners in his area. He plans to start a similar program in Gainesville, Florida.

Those who love animals are glad that these programs exist and that the options for perpetual pet care are continuing to grow. However, responsible pet owners must consider the benefits and drawbacks of such programs before making a commitment that will affect the long-term health and welfare of their pets.