

## **Aging Happens: Easing a beloved pet's final transition**

*By Ellen Waldman*

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If you're one of the 68 percent of U.S. households, or about 85 million families, who own a pet, you'll agree that it's often very difficult to see them age, become infirm and die. Just like us, they greatly benefit from loving support at the end of their lives.

If you've never considered how to apply a continuum of care or a "hospice" approach to your animal friend's end of life, meet Paula Backus, DMV. (DrPaulaBackus@gmail.com; 541-625-9606). She serves all of the Rogue Valley and beyond. In fact, she does a much better job of describing her work and her services than I could, so, with editing for brevity, here are her words.

"I have been a mobile veterinarian and veterinary acupuncturist in the Rogue Valley for nearly 30 years. Differing from conventional veterinary medicine in an office setting, my work is more about companionship animals and their human families to and through the end-of-life in a comfortable and gentle home environment.

"As human hospice becomes more understood and utilized, I have seen a greater interest in this service for animals. Compassionate euthanasia still seems to be most people's first choice for their beloved pets so as to avoid unnecessary suffering. Depending upon the situation, hospice can be a viable option, especially when pain can be managed, and there is a person willing and able to be attentive and care for the dying animal.

"Regardless of what option is chosen, I firmly believe that letting an animal be in their comfortable and familiar home surroundings provides the most kind and compassionate environment for the final transition, minimizing stress on the animal and their guardian as well.

"The process of an animal's decline and death forms a continuum, both of the types of experiences that may occur as death approaches, as well as some choices in terms of how to handle their pain, disability, and demise.

"Sometimes there is a desire from the guardian to hospice the animal, letting them die naturally. Sometimes the limiting factor is the human's ability to stay through the process. And sometimes it proceeds slowly and gracefully and both are able to let go.

"Although I fully respect a decision for surgical and/or chemotherapeutic treatment of an elderly animal, I often tend towards a gentler palliative approach at home. Sometimes there is nothing more that can be done. Then it's time to watch and listen closely to what is most supportive to this being's quality of life, and eventually, it's end of life.

"I can be present with animals and people, and navigate together through what is needed as life nears its end. As heartbreaking as it often is, it is such an honor to serve in this way.

"Recently I got a call from an elderly, disabled man. His faithful companion was unable to get up and he had been caring for her in this state for over a week. He had hoped, as we all do, that she would die on

her own. I listened to stories of how this wonderful dog had companioned my client for nearly 15 years. Gradually, through his love and grief and having it witnessed by another, he realized that the kindest thing would be to let her go.”

Clearly, there are several choices to be made through this path of caring for your animal friend at the end of their life. With services like the one that Dr. Backus offers, we can provide for our pets in ways that best address their needs and ours.

And by the way, in case you wondered about Oregon, The Beaver State ranks fourth on a listing of household pet ownership in the United States, with 63.6 percent of Oregonians owning at least one cat or dog. We are all luckier for this unconditional companionship they provide to our lives.