

Diane Keaton's \$5M pet trust would be over the top if reports prove true – here's how to ensure your beloved pet is safe after you are gone

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Diane Keaton loved her dog, Reggie.

The award-winning actor, director and real estate entrepreneur frequently posted photos and video clips of the golden retriever on her social media accounts. After she died on Oct. 11, 2025, at 79, some news outlets reported that she left US\$5 million of her estimated \$100 million estate to her dog.

I'm a law professor who teaches about wills, trusts and other forms of inheritance law. Every semester, I teach my students how they can help clients provide for their pets after death. Because they, like many Americans, love their pets and want to know how to take care of them, this topic always piques their interest.

Writing pets into a will

An estimated 66% of all U.S. households include at least one pet. Many Americans consider their cats, dogs, tortoises or other animals to be part of their family, and their spending on those nonhuman relatives is immense. In 2024, they paid a total of about \$152 billion for goods and services to feed and otherwise support their pets.

Taking good care of your pets can go beyond buying them treats and sweaters. It can include leaving clear directions to ensure their needs are met once you're gone. There are several ways that you can do this.

The first is through your will. You can't give your pet money directly in your will, because the law says that pets are property, like your books or your dishes.

You can, however, leave a bequest, the technical term for a gift to a person or a cause listed in a will, to someone who will be the animal's caretaker. That bequest can include directions that the money be spent meeting the pet's needs.

It's worth it to also name an alternate or contingent caretaker in case the first person you name does not want to or cannot take on that responsibility, or they die before you or the animals you've provided for in the will.

Choupette's life of luxury

German fashion designer, photographer and creative director Karl Lagerfeld, who died in 2019 at 85, was someone who made the mistake of leaving money directly to his fluffy Birman cat, Choupette. It worked out for Choupette, though.

The cat was, according to several reports, still alive in 2025 and eating meals out of the porcelain bowls that Lagerfeld bought for her. Choupette is cared for at great expense and in the utmost luxury by Françoise Caçote, the designer's former housekeeper. The cat even had a 13th birthday party at Versailles.

Another pet owner who did right by her pet was the comedian, producer and red carpet interviewer Joan Rivers.

Rivers had two rescue dogs in Manhattan and two more dogs in California when she died in 2014 at age 81. Rivers had made provisions for their care in her will.



The late Joan Rivers, right, seen on the set of her short-lived talk show in 1987, planned ahead for her dogs' care.

Bettmann via Getty Images

Creating pet trusts

If you'd like an arrangement that's more secure than a will, then you might want to opt for a pet trust, another celebrity favorite. These kinds of trusts were not possible until the 1990s, because pets were not considered true beneficiaries – meaning they couldn't sue the trustee.

But in the 1990s, states began to change their rules to allow for pet trusts. Today, pet trusts are valid in the whole country, although the rules vary slightly from state to state.

To establish a pet trust, you or a lawyer must draw up a trust document that names two important people: a trustee and a caretaker. The trustee is the person who will manage the money you leave in trust. They will make distributions to the caretaker that you select.

You must also specify how the money is to be spent meeting the animal's needs and who would get any money that could be left in the trust when the pet dies. Typically, these trusts take effect at the owner's death, just like other provisions in a will.

Drafting a pet trust can be free, if you use an online template and get no legal guidance. The same thing might cost around \$100 if you use an online service such as Legal Zoom that provides directions. More commonly, however, pet trusts are part of a broader estate plan, and costs range depending on how complicated your estate is.

When the rich go overboard

One of the most over-the-top pet trusts came from Leona Helmsley, the New York hotel and real estate mogul known widely as the "Queen of Mean." She was famous for her pettiness and tough management style and for landing in prison for tax evasion.

When Helmsley died in 2007, she left her dog, a Maltese named Trouble who had reportedly bitten members of her staff, a \$12 million trust fund. Most of Helmsley's estate went to the Helmsley Charitable Trust, but she made individual gifts to several relatives, and the gift to Trouble was larger than any of those.

The grandchildren, upset that Trouble got more money than they did, took the case to court, where the probate judge was less than impressed by Trouble's luxury lifestyle and knocked down the amount in trust to \$2 million. The other \$10 million flowed back to her family's foundation, where the bulk of the estate went in the first place.

Lesson learned: Your dog can have a trust fund, but don't go overboard.

Bequests for pets can be challenged – in which case it's up to courts to determine how much they think is reasonable for the pet's need. In Helmsley's case, \$12 million was found to be excessive. And maybe with good reason. Trouble still had a nice life with fewer millions. The dog died in December 2010 after several years in Sarasota, Florida, at a Helmsley-owned hotel.

Other pet owners who aren't celebrities have used pet trusts as well, such as Bill Dorris, a Nashville businessman without any human heirs. He left his dog, Lulu, \$5 million.

Pet-loving celebrities who loved all the pets

Finally, there's a lesson to be learned from British fashion designer and icon Alexander McQueen, who was worth £16 million (\$21 million) when he died in 2010 at the age of 40. McQueen left £50,000 (\$66,000) in a trust for his two bull terriers so that they would be well cared for during the remainder of their lives.

McQueen also included a bequest of £100,000 (\$132,000) to the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in his will to help fund the care of some of the millions of other animals out there that need the basics of food and shelter.

Animal shelters, in the U.K., the United States and other countries, help rescue and protect animals, and these animals need more help than the Choupettes and Troubles of the world.

So, my advice is that you go ahead and create a pet trust for your cat. But don't forget to give some money in your will – and ideally while you're alive – to help the vast majority of the millions of companion animals who need new homes every year. None of them have trust funds.

What becomes of Reggie, Keaton's golden retriever, and her estate remains to be seen. Keaton, who starred in hit movies such as "Annie Hall," "Reds" and "The First Wives Club," isn't the first celebrity to leave millions of dollars to a pet. And it's unlikely that she will be the last.

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