

Robbed gran warns of house-sitter hell

Chris Robinson [The Sunday Times](#), July 11, 2010

A WA woman has told how a hired "house-sitter from hell" locked up her pets, and robbed and vandalised her home.

Waroona grandmother Jennifer Ainsworth is warning homeowners of the perils of using internet housesitting websites to find people to mind their property. The 70-year-old returned from an overseas trip to find her house-sitter had mistreated her pets and stolen more than \$3000 worth of household items.

"We got home from a wonderful holiday to find she'd locked my three-legged siamese cat in my bedroom for two months, the two dogs were traumatised and had lost weight, and things were missing around the house," Ms Ainsworth said.

"It was an absolute nightmare. I never expected anything like this would happen." She said her insurance company would not provide cover for the thefts, which included electrical and kitchen goods, because the house-sitter had been invited into the home.

Ms Ainsworth, who lives with her sister, said she had met the house-sitter before agreeing to let her take care of the home. "She came across so nice and she was close to our age so that's why we trusted her," she said.

"She told us she had been police-cleared. I then asked her to bring her references when she came but she never did, and by that time we were packed up and ready to go." Ms Ainsworth said the house was in an "atrocious" state when she returned from holidays.

"People should insist on seeing references and having the website provide a police clearance, and make sure to have a signed contract so they can claim on insurance if things go wrong," she said.

Housecarers.com spokesman Ian White said homeowners needed to do a thorough background check before choosing a house-sitter. "We make it clear to homeowners that they need to check references and verify these references with a phone call," he said. "We also provide a house-sitting agreement, very much like a rental agreement, which we strongly advise all homeowners to use." Mr White said house-sitters were blocked from using the site if criminal offences were reported.

Office of Crime Prevention executive manager Bernie Durkin said homeowners should do at least two referee checks on prospective sitters. "If the referee checks are a bit dubious, do not enter into an arrangement," he said. "And make it clear upfront that house-sitters are responsible for any loss or damage to any property while in the house."