

Masters of Disaster

Michigan shelter makes staff preparedness a priority

“Free-Food-and-Beer Days”? Sounds good. “Winning-Lotto-Tickets-for-Everyone Days”? Sounds even better. But “Disaster Days”? That might not seem like a tempting way to spend your free time, but the Michigan Humane Society managed to attract almost 80 staff members to four successful events last spring that readied them—and their pets—for disasters.

Disaster Days offered plenty of opportunities to prepare and learn. Staff received disaster planning guides and copies of their pets’ vet records in waterproof bags. If they brought their pets with them, the animals were microchipped, registered, and photographed—in about 15 minutes. The photos were used to create laminated wallet I.D. cards. Staff could take advantage of free and at-cost supplies to build evacuation kits for their pets, and both staff and volunteers attended a one-hour training session.

The shelter made it easy for staff to take part: Disaster Days took place at different locations. The events were held on Sundays, when the shelter is usually closed. And volunteers helped minimize staff involvement. The only employees on the clock were members of the emergency preparedness work team. In this excerpted interview, animal welfare specialist Linda Reider discussed the details with *Animal Sheltering* writer Katina Antoniadis.

What made the Michigan Humane Society decide to focus on disaster preparedness for staff?

We really realized that the foundation on which all of our future emergency preparedness rests is personal preparedness. If our staff isn’t ready at home with their families and their animals, then they’re not going to be able to help take care of the animals at work. People that work in animal shelters have a dual responsibility; they have their animals at home and they have the animals at work, and we wanted



A microchip company donated 113 chips to the shelter; each staff person could have one pet chipped for free and the rest of their pets done at cost. MICHIGAN HUMANE SOCIETY

to make a really easy, fun, quick way for them to do personal preparedness so that it was done and it was out of their way. We billed it as one-stop disaster proofing.

Did most of the staff take advantage of Disaster Days?

Well, 77 staff took part, and we ended up disaster-proofing 231 animals. So we felt really positive about that—and we realized we have more to go. Some people missed the events because they weren’t convenient, or some actually don’t have animals. Then other people were just sort of waiting and [wondering], “What are these going to be like?” So we’ve decided we’re going to be offering them every six months so that new people or people who get new animals or people who just missed it before will have a chance to do this. We’re going to hold them in May and November because we wanted to miss the really busy time for us, and we also wanted to miss the really cold season for the comfort of [transporting] the animals.

What kind of training for staff and volunteers did you have to supplement the events?

It’s a one-hour training in three parts: introduction to emergency and disasters, and then how emergencies affect animals and animal facilities, and then thirdly, protecting animals at home. We handed out a family preparedness brochure; we got those free from the state emergency management office. And then we inserted an animal disaster planning checklist that we made ... and we also made another handout which lists emergency supplies by species. We recognize a lot of our staff have unusual animals and they need to know how to evacuate or shelter in place safely with a snake or with their birds, or what to do with their horses.

Then we gave them emergency stickers for their front and back doors, and we created animal reclaim cards, because one of our big concerns was people getting separated from their animals and having a quick, easy way to reclaim them. So we handed those out in a form that



As part of its Disaster Days events, the Michigan Humane Society created pet ID cards for people to keep in their wallets in case of disaster. MICHIGAN HUMANE SOCIETY

has a place for them to put a photo, and then they fill out a bit of information. They could bring those to the events and we turn them into wallet cards. The training is one hour, and we made it mandatory for all staff who work at least 20 hours. For volunteers, it's optional—we had a great turnout, though.

Were there any staff who didn't see the importance as much? I imagine after Katrina that's less and less of a possibility.

Well, the problem we face in Michigan is, we really are a state that doesn't have a lot of large-scale disasters. The most common disasters in our state are flooding and high-wind events like tornadoes. So people see hurricane things—and of course we sent teams down post-Katrina and post-Rita, but a lot of people in Michigan have a tendency to say that will not happen here. So in our training we tried to bring across how really what we're preparing for is emergencies. And by being better prepared for emergencies, we're actually doing disaster preparedness—we're kind of coming in the back door. We're saying, you know, there's a potential for one of our shelters to experience a fire—the other day we had a hazardous materials spill in front of our Detroit shelter. They didn't have to evacuate the shelter, but it was the kind of thing we can use as examples of emergency situations that we would face in our facility. Our emergency planning is in phases, and the first phase was the personal preparedness. I think it's the last phase for a lot of places.

What kind of feedback have you gotten so far from your staff?

Their comments have been that they really learned a lot that they didn't know and that they were really glad to learn about it in a way that makes them also feel that they can be safe. And the other thing is that people appreciated that it was fun. We had food; our staff were able to chat. You know, you don't get to see your co-workers' animals very often. You hear about them, you know, because you say, "So-and-so ate the couch," but you don't get to meet them as little furry people. We were worried about animals getting in fights in the waiting room, but we didn't have that problem at all.

It sounds like with the evacuation kits and everything else, this would take a lot of funding. Did you get deals for buying a lot of supplies, or were some donated?

We did get some donated supplies—col-

lars and leashes in particular. We had leftover leashes from a special event. We had a lot of donated carriers and crates that we did not need in our system. For instance, we had flown an airlift of animals from Houston to Detroit [after Rita], and all of those crates weren't really being used. So we were able to give those away to staff who needed to supplement their number of crates so they'd have one per animal. We got our microchip supplying company to donate 113 microchips. We guaranteed that each staff person could get a free microchip and registration; if they go beyond that, they had to pay at cost (\$11). And at our facility, it's "Microchip and register"; it's not "Microchip and then you work out the registration yourself." We do it. And then everybody was able to outfit one animal for free and after that, they paid cost on supplies. So our actual supplies cost ended up being just about \$500, which was not much. We did have to pay some overtime to some of the staff people, but we kept that as limited as possible. So what we spent per person was like 15 bucks, and cost to disaster-proof an animal was 6 bucks.

How did you produce the wallet cards for the pets?

We have a connection with a company that produces them. They normally charge a dollar a card and they're charging us 60 cents. We developed an Excel database that we put the information in, and I used a volunteer to do that work. The photos

The shelter provided free and at-cost supplies to help staff build evacuation kits for their pets. MICHIGAN HUMANE SOCIETY



were taken by the folks who at our shelter take the photos of animals for Petfinder. And then [our web designer] merged the two into a card. That's probably been the stickiest part in that it took longer than we expected. We are looking at this point into getting our own card printer.

What lessons on disaster preparedness did the shelter take away from being involved with the Katrina and Rita response?

I think the lessons we brought home were that it takes longer for [people who have companion animals] to evacuate during an emergency. I remember when we worked in Houston, post-Rita. There were a lot of people who were told to take their animals, and they loved their animals—they really did. They weren't ready to go, and when you have to go on short notice, they just weren't ready to take all the accoutrements, and they hadn't thought it through. So we're trying to really get people to think it through in advance and have a "ready to go" kit. Having a plan, having a place to go with animals is really important; that's part of our training is to teach people to contact somebody out of the area who would allow you to come with your animals. And also, to be prepared to shelter in place is just as important. If you're not going to get help for three days to two weeks, then you've got to have the supplies ready at home. The organization also said this should be sort of an employee benefit; if you work at Michigan Humane, we also care about your animals at home. And that was a good message to bring across to staff: that their safety and the safety of their animals is very important to us. Of course we want them to be able to come in and help during an emergency situation, but it's a dual message.

This would be a great thing for national animal welfare organizations, too.

That was another way we came at this. Michigan Humane is a pretty large local humane society. We have a couple hundred staff members, we have three facilities that are full-service veterinary clinics and shelters, and we have contracts for housing with municipalities. We have a separate administrative office, we have

a separate warehouse, we have the Pet Education Center. We're probably bigger than a lot of facilities, and my challenge to the work team was, if we can do this and pull this off with our staff, then anyone can do it. We've already had interest from the Department of Agriculture and the Michigan Veterinary Medical Association in using our model to help vet clinics and the Department of Ag staff prepare their people because again, these people are critical during animal emergencies. You don't want to have them at home trying to drag their cat out from under the bed and figure out what to do. Plus, it also prepared our people to be animal professionals as far as having this knowledge to give out in an emergency. Not only do they know what to say; they have done it.

And like you said, it was quick. There's planning involved, but the actual doing of it doesn't take long.

I would say the average was about 40 to 50 animals per clinic, so 230 animals for four times. One other key thing was if people had animals that really couldn't come to the events because they were elderly, or they already were microchipped, and they just didn't want to transport them, we allowed them to come through with a photo of their animal. They could then just build their kit, get their card made with the photo that they turned in to us. The majority actually came in person, but we did have that option, and that really helped for some animals. Another thing that we found is that most of our staff did not have their animals microchipped—I think because of the cost, and you know, they had never gotten around to it. So this was a way to get a microchip, and a lot of our staff were really thankful and said, "Thank you for putting this on and making it affordable. This is something I've always wanted to do, and now it's done." AS

To request a packet of information and forms for staff emergency preparedness, e-mail Linda Reider at LReider@michiganhumane.org. Visit www.AnimalSheltering.org/disaster and look under "Related Resources" to view the materials used by the Michigan Humane Society.

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