

Only You (and Up-to-Code Fire Standards) Can Prevent Shelter Fires

BY CARRIE ALLAN

Florida's animal shelters are all too accustomed to coping with the annual spate of hurricanes that sweep over the region. But disaster recently came in a different form to the Sunshine State, where two shelters were severely damaged by fires that broke out on the premises and killed dozens of animals.

Along with more than 30 cats and seven dogs, Seminole County Animal Services lost the back section of its building, which housed small dogs and feral, quarantined, and stray cats; the agency also lost offices, an examination room, a storage area, and the garage area where officers unloaded stray animals, says shelter supervisor Mary Beth Lake. The shelter is still operating four months later, Lake says, "but techs are working on top of techs, and staff are crammed into a much smaller space."

A fire at the Jacksonville Humane Society in April was more severe. Leona Sheddán, the new executive director, got a call in the middle of the night informing her that the shelter had burned to the ground and all the animals had died. "It was the worst moment of my life," she says. She rushed to the shelter, and as she drove into the neighborhood, she saw dogs wandering along a nearby road and police officers rounding them up. At the shelter, dogs milled around and even tried to follow the firefighters back into the 40-foot flames, says Sheddán. While the initial report of complete destruction was overblown—rescuers saved 80 animals from the blaze—86 animals died in the fire and the main building itself was destroyed.

Shelter staff found amazingly resilient animal survivors, the most miraculous a young cat whose name, even before the fire, was Lucky. "A few days after the fire, some folks were cleaning up inside the



Eighty-six animals died in an April fire at the Jacksonville Humane Society. JACKSONVILLE HUMANE SOCIETY

burned-up building and one of them said, 'Shh, I hear something,' " says Sheddán. The workers then heard meowing from under the rubble, and when they started digging frantically, out popped Lucky, whiskers singed and feet burned—but still alive and well enough to soon be adopted out with his brother, T.J., who'd survived the fire in a less dramatic manner. Five firefighters also ended up adopting dogs they'd rescued.

As both shelters develop their plans to rebuild, Lake and Sheddán say that other animal shelters and rescue groups in their area and around the country have been extraordinarily supportive in the wake of the fires, opening their doors to more animals and sending equipment, food, and on-site help. "The animal welfare community, we don't all believe in doing things the exact same way, but we all have one commitment to the animals, and we rally around each other in time of crisis," says Sheddán.

It's been a bad fire season; a set of shelter buildings on the New Jersey shore was

also severely damaged by fire as this issue of *Animal Sheltering* was going to press.

The tragedies serve as a reminder of the importance of ensuring that buildings meet—and ideally exceed—local fire and safety codes. The fire at Seminole County was held back by a firewall that not only prevented its spread to the kennels but served as a support that allowed firefighters to get onto the roof and fight the flames from above. But the vintage-1989 shelter lacked a building-wide sprinkler system. Lake looks forward to building a new facility that includes that feature.

If you're in the process of planning a new facility, fire safety should be one of the hundreds of aspects you discuss with your architect. The National Fire Protection Association recently updated its guidelines for fire safety standards in animal facilities. The 2007 edition of the NFPA's *Standard on Fire and Life Safety in Animal Housing Facilities* is available as a booklet or downloadable PDF document at the association's website, nfpa.org. AS