

Will Your Response be a Natural Disaster?

A mock shelter evacuation illuminates the good, the bad, and the potentially lethal during crisis response

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Communication disconnects and volunteers' unfamiliarity with handling shelter animals can turn an emergency into a disaster. But you can prepare! DAVID H. LEWIS/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Though natural disasters tend to pack the element of surprise, your shelter doesn't need to be caught off guard.

A recent study published in *Anthrozoös* (Vol. 20, No. 4), conducted by the University of Colorado's Leslie Irvine, Ph. D., concluded that volunteers and the media will play a crucial part in any animal shelter evacuation. Yet both are double-edged swords—and which way the blades swing depends on some simple but indispensable preparation.

When a metropolitan Colorado shelter had to relocate its animals due to construction, management decided to use the move as a trial run for a disaster scenario evacuation. "The aim was to relocate all dogs and cats while maintaining kennel records and any medications," wrote Irvine, who observed the exercise for her study. "It was an opportunity to determine how quickly the animals could be evacuated."

Animal control officers and the State Animal Response Team (SART) were in charge. Volunteers included those from the shelter and SART, as well as those provided by a local veterinary technician training program, bringing the volunteer total to 35.

At the end of the exercise, "all animals were successfully evacuated from the building and situated in temporary housing in two hours and fifteen minutes. Total time just for exiting animals from the building was 90 minutes," Irvine wrote.

But the problems were telling. Volunteers from the vet tech team had no experience handling shelter animals: Two dogs began fighting during the evacuation, when they were mistakenly brought nose-to-nose in a narrow hallway. At another point, a volunteer briefly left a cat's cage door open and unattended, allowing the animal to escape. Both incidents, though eventually controlled, would have caused major time

loss during a real evacuation. Volunteers also said that the order of command was unclear; they were unsure about who was giving directions and who they were supposed to listen to.

When local TV news stations rolled in to film the event, more complications ensued. The media hullabaloo interrupted and delayed evacuation procedures; and, when pulled aside for media interviews, many volunteers clearly knew little about the animals or who was running the shelter or evacuation.

Despite these problems, Irvine noted that volunteers are a great resource when properly tapped and managed; and the media can bring public awareness and healthy publicity to a shelter. She provided a few suggestions for how to ensure these two groups remain assets in a disaster situation:

- "... the system for organizing people in a disaster response should be simple and straightforward."
- "... shelter emergency plans should include lists of people who are interested in being trained for incident response ... [which] could include people willing to foster shelter animals."
- "... untrained volunteers cannot be used in disaster evacuation or response."
- "... anticipate and plan around the inevitable arrival of strangers interested in helping"
- "... volunteers and authorized personnel should be readily identifiable ... [in] brightly colored t-shirts with visible lettering on front and back."
- "... one person should be assigned as Public Information Officer ... [to] provide a single, consistent voice for the press."
- "Volunteers should be instructed to refer any reporters to the person in charge of public relations."

Should shelters prepare, the next disaster—be it a wildfire, earthquake, or hurricane cloud—just may have a silver lining. **AS**