

Katrina's Silver Lining

The storm taught responders that animal welfare groups must be part of the plan

BY TIM CARMAN



Long forced to beg for inclusion in community disaster planning, animal welfare organizations—including HSUS responders, shown here during a 1997 flood—now have a place at the table.

The way Scotlund Haisley remembers the incident, it was past 10 p.m., well past dark, and he and his team—along with several emergency vehicles, full of sickly and dehydrated animals rescued from the streets and flooded homes of New Orleans—were facing a locked gate.

It was early September 2005, the height of the Hurricane Katrina response effort, and the locked gate was barring rescue teams from the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, La., the site of the emergency animal shelter set up for rescued pets. No matter how the teams argued their case, no matter how ill or badly injured the rescued animals were, the center's security guards weren't about to crack open the gates.

"We had dying animals," recalls Haisley, then executive director of the Washington Animal Rescue League, now senior director for the Emergency Services department of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). "One had already died in my vehicle."

Unbeknownst to Haisley and the other disaster teams, just days into the post-Katrina animal rescue efforts, Lamar-Dixon had already hit its state-mandated capacity. No more dogs, cats, birds, or other animals could enter the facility.

The frustrated rescue teams were directed to take their animals—including a good number of pit bulls—to Louisiana State University (LSU), where another emergency shelter had been established. Haisley was concerned, as he'd heard LSU wasn't accepting pit bulls. But the hour was late and his options were few. The trucks headed to LSU in Baton Rouge, where they waited for another hour to get the animals processed. Once they reached the head of the line, LSU officials told them, "We're not taking pit bulls," Haisley remembers.

Nearly at the end of his rope, Haisley knew of another animal group that had set up a shelter more than two hours away from Gonzales via a patchwork of crumbled interstate highways—and would take the animals, pits and all. It was well past midnight, but he drove there, dropped off his animals, and returned back to base in Gonzales. "We had to get an hour's sleep so we could go out and rescue more animals," he says.

If anything encapsulates the chaos of Katrina, it's this story, Haisley says. It underscores so many of the pet-related issues that arose after the lethal hurricane slammed into the Gulf Coast in August 2005: the lim-

ited emergency sheltering facilities, the muddled communication, and, perhaps most important of all, the lack of preparation and planning on the part of the governments and agencies designed to serve people during disasters.

The scene outside Lamar-Dixon, in other words, was symbolic of larger problems among government and nonprofit agencies during large-scale disasters: In the planning and response efforts, pets were not a priority.

Change for the Better

In the three-plus years since Katrina, that has changed—and changed dramatically. The local chapters of the American Red Cross now work more closely with local animal organizations wherever disasters strike to make sure there are adequate shelters for both people and pets. And most importantly, because of the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act, which President George W. Bush signed into law in October 2006, states are now required to address the needs of companion animals during disasters. Under



Scotlund Haisley went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the safety of the dogs he and his team rescued from the streets of New Orleans.

the new law, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will reimburse states and counties for work performed to rescue, shelter, and care for animals during disasters.

The federal Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act, signed into law in 2006, aims to ensure that pets are not stranded during disasters.

The most persistent promoter of the PETS Act was The HSUS. The organization's legislative team seized the moment provided by Katrina and pushed, once again, for a federal law designed to help animals before, during, and after disasters.

"We'd been promoting the concept of a federal mandate for preparedness for many years, without much progress," says Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The HSUS. "Katrina changed the political landscape entirely, because anyone with a television could see how shortsighted and counterproductive it

was to make people leave their pets behind. We had no trouble finding dedicated sponsors, and the basic mechanism of making agency funding contingent on emergency planning that included animals was simple and uncontroversial."

This time, Congress listened—and not just to The HSUS. The forces that pushed the PETS Act into law were many. The news coverage of the Katrina response effort, including interviews with pet owners who'd refused to evacuate because they were unable to bring their animals and countless televised images of animals stranded on New Orleans rooftops or swimming through polluted floodwaters, generated a chorus of howls from animal lovers across the nation. And nearly six months after Katrina, in February 2006, the Department of Homeland Security issued a 228-page document titled "Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned," which stated, quite simply, that disaster plans need "to contemplate household pets and other animals."

As noted in an addendum to the report, "Evacuation and sheltering operations inevitably involve endangered people who own pets, but most emergency shelters do not accept pets due to health and safety regulations. If there is no opportunity to bring their pets with them to safety, some pet owners will refuse to evacuate or will delay evacuation. According to a Fritz Institute survey, approximately 44 percent of the people who did not evacuate for Hurricane Katrina stayed, at least in part, because they did not want to leave their pets behind."

Others got the message loud and clear. Kevin Kellenberger, manager of Partner Services at the American Red Cross, will be the first to tell you that, while some local chapters were better about planning for pets, his organization had historically never seen emergency animal sheltering "as a mandate or priority."

Katrina changed all that. "I think it became very obvious through news reports [when people were] saying, 'I won't go if I can't take my pets,'" Kellenberger says. "It was a very obvious thing that was pointed out during the event."

A New Understanding

Once the flaws were pointed out, the situation had to change. The change began with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the American Red Cross and The HSUS, in which the two national organizations would "work with the chapters and administrative units of their respective organizations to emphasize the need to incorporate the animal component in all disaster plans."

As part of the MOU, the drafters suggested that the Red Cross chapters and local animal agencies should work together with local government animal care and control agencies to develop temporary animal boarding



CONSIE VON GONTARD/THE HSUS

The images of Katrina's animal victims—like this dog, who sought safety in an air conditioning cage when his home was flooded—galvanized the nation to insist that animals be included in future disaster plans.



TIM CARMAN/THE HSUS



KATHY MILAN/THE HSUS

options for all sizes of disasters; jointly evaluate shelter sites in order to determine suitability for co-located pet sheltering, or identify nearby sites for pet sheltering; and participate in government planning committees addressing animal evacuation and sheltering needs.

The Red Cross chapters have taken the suggestions to heart, too. “In the last year, [pet preparedness and planning] has not been a surprise or a forgotten issue,” Kellenberger says. “It’s always comes up naturally as part of the discussion.”

In June 2006, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed a bill into law that mandates that state and local parishes revise their disaster plans to include companion animals. As a result, says The HSUS’s Haisley, parishes across the Pelican State have signed MOUs with various animal organizations to provide pet rescue, evacuation, and sheltering services as needed during disasters.

Such a mishmash of agreements, you’d think, might lead to chaos on the ground after a disaster, much like it did after Katrina, when rescue teams across the country descended upon New Orleans, including a number that operated outside the authority of central command. The difference this time, says Haisley, is that nine separate national and international animal organizations have joined forces to create the National Animal Rescue and Shelter Coalition (NARSC); the group includes not only The HSUS, but the American Humane Association, the ASPCA, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, Code 3 Associates, the International Fund for Animal

Welfare, the National Animal Control Association, the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators, and United Animal Nations.

The brilliance of NARSC is that each group, regardless of whether it has already signed an MOU with a parish or some other municipality, agrees to follow the same code of conduct, procedures, and command structures. Every NARSC member must undergo extensive training—FEMA and Incident Command System training, for example—before being allowed to join the coalition. This will ensure that every responder shares the same credential, and eliminate an issue common during Katrina, when so many good-hearted but untrained rescuers came to help. Some ended up operating outside the official rescue and sheltering system—likely saving animals’ lives, but making the tracking and reunion process more difficult.

Such cooperation between animal responders makes it easy for government officials, whether state or federal, to turn to NARSC during times of disaster. “The states and feds all love this thing,” Haisley adds. “What’s most impressive to the government is that nine groups have come together and agreed on something.”

The combination of public awareness, increased training, and federal and state laws have given animal disaster responders something they’ve never had before: a seat at the table. Diana Rothe-Smith is the executive director of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD). The organization formed in 1970

While many people have learned to bring their animals with them when they evacuate, some still think it’s safe to leave them behind—and cats are particularly vulnerable to that perception. Here, HSUS disaster responder Kelly Colardarci cradles a kitty rescued after Hurricane Ike.

Disaster Planning

Removing animals from the disaster zone is only the first part of a successful response. The HSUS and other agencies are still working on a reliable tracking system to ensure that animals and owners are reunited after the crisis has passed.



Haisley and Colardarci remove a pet from a home on Galveston Island after 2008's Hurricane Ike.



after another massive hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, the Category 5 Camille, which left government and nonprofits scrambling to care for the many displaced residents, with little coordination and communication between the groups.

The national VOAD has chapters in all 50 states and five territories. When a disaster strikes, a state may call on its local VOAD to serve in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), which is a temporary command center where leaders collect and analyze data to make strategic decisions about emergency needs. As a voice in the center,

VOAD represents the needs of its many nonprofit groups, from the Salvation Army to United Way of America.

The HSUS has been an official national VOAD member for more than 10 years, and remains the only animal welfare organization to be part of this important information-sharing group of responders. "We can be a megaphone for The HSUS," Rothe-Smith says, allowing VOAD to communicate animal care needs to those in command during disasters.

If, for some reason, VOAD doesn't have a seat in the Emergency Operations Center, then somebody else will.

It might be a member of NARSC or it might be a local animal control group. Whoever it is, “somebody is in the EOC, talking about the animals now,” Haisley says. “The point is, we’re recognized as a professional entity on all levels ... and that’s what has come out of Katrina.”

Where the Rubber Hits the Road

This summer, Hurricane Gustav gave the government, nonprofits, and private groups the chance to prove they had indeed learned the lessons of Katrina. Gustav hit the Louisiana coastline on Sept. 1 as a strong Category 2 storm. Disaster planners were ready. Unlike Katrina, when pet owners weren’t allowed to take their animals on buses during evacuations, officials had more than 100 climate-controlled vehicles in New Orleans alone, ready to ferry residents and pets out of the hurricane’s path, according to a *National Geographic News* report.

“Buses picked up New Orleanians at 17 locations around the city and dropped residents off at a processing center near the Louisiana Superdome. There, pet owners were issued wristbands and pet collars that had matching identification numbers,” the *National Geographic* reporter wrote. Those animals were whisked to at least a half dozen temporary shelters around the state.

Such a successful evacuation does not happen by accident, and one way FEMA, The HSUS, the Red Cross, and others are promoting animal awareness during disasters is through the recently developed Community Pet Preparedness Toolkit. The kit, available at ready.gov/america/toolkit_pets/index.html, provides communities with the tools to provide better for animals during disasters and to improve public outreach about those emergency plans.

Still, emergency planners and responders will tell you that not everything has been perfected. One area still under development is a reliable tracking system to ensure companion animals and owners are quickly reunited after the emergency has passed, no matter where the pet or person has been temporarily holed up during the disaster. Both FEMA and The HSUS hope to have a functioning system in place for the next hurricane season.

And while the public has gotten the message that they need to evacuate with their pets, as in so many other situations, felines are still often treated as second-class citizens. During the Cedar Rapids floods, Haisley notes, the rescue teams had to pick up very few left-behind dogs. Local citizens had gotten the message, and if they were unable to evacuate with their dogs, they brought them to the emergency shelter before leaving town.

But many left behind their cats, still under the common misconception that the animals could fend for themselves. “We didn’t find one drowned dog in Cedar



Rapids,” says Haisley, “but we did find drowned cats who’d been left behind in houses.” He hopes that all pets-in-disaster messaging to the public will emphasize that cats, too—and any other animal family members—must be transported to safety.

The changes in preparation, evacuation, and sheltering have made it possible for planners to take more time to focus on the areas that are still lacking. The preparation and response for Hurricane Gustav provided the perfect example. Because people could evacuate with their pets, there wasn’t the same desperate need to rescue animals as there was during Katrina. And because human and animal shelters were far more coordinated, there was less worry and stress among owners about their pets’ whereabouts.

“While disaster planning has come a long way, most communities are still not adequately prepared,” says Haisley. “Local animal welfare organizations can help by adding their voices. Reach out to local government and disaster organizations to ensure that pets have been included in community disaster plans. Make sure you’ve got evacuation and emergency sheltering plans in place. It’s unlikely we’ll face another Hurricane Katrina in our lifetime, but it’s still crucial to prepare for the worst.” AS

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Disaster response work will never be easy, but better interagency coordination should make for more happy endings.