





# Emergency Planning in a Post-Katrina World



**Northern Virginia shelters pull together to obtain trailers to aid pets in disasters**

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Five years later, the images remain vivid and disturbing: pets left behind in homes ravaged by floodwaters, and homeowners airlifted off rooftops after risking their lives to stay with their animals.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast in August 2005, it brought unprecedented attention to the plight of companion animals in disasters—and to the people who, often through no fault of their own, were unable to safely shepherd their pets through the storm.

“After Katrina, I think everybody became a lot more aware of what could happen. We learned from that that there are people who will not evacuate if they can’t take their pets. We also learned that pets get sometimes abandoned, left behind, and the suffering that’s caused when that happens,” says Susan Sherman, interim executive director of the Animal Welfare League of Arlington (AWLA) in Northern Virginia, a private, nonprofit humane society that runs a shelter and contracts with Arlington County to provide animal control services. “So we wanted to try to do something to make it possible for people to evacuate with their pets.”

Shortly after Katrina, an AWLA official attended a disaster planning conference sponsored by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and learned about disaster preparedness pet trailers—which are designed to help set up a temporary pet-friendly shelter at a site such as a school during an emergency that forces people to leave their homes. The trailers are stocked with everything a shelter would need—from crates and litter pans to food trays, ID bands for animals to wear, garbage cans, hand sanitizer, flashlights, duct tape, mops and buckets, and office supplies.

Arlington County’s Office of Emergency Management (OEM) obtained a \$20,000 U.S. Department of Homeland Security grant to purchase a 20-foot-long trailer and sup-

plies, then consulted with the AWLA to develop a plan for how it should be stocked and operated. The AWLA unveiled the county’s trailer in February 2007.

The trailer has not yet been called into action, but in the event of an emergency requiring a temporary human shelter, Sherman explains, county officials could notify the AWLA that they want it to be pet-friendly. The AWLA would tow the trailer to the designated site and make the supplies available to set up the animal portion of the shelter. AWLA employees and trained volunteers would provide the staffing. Only pets belonging to people entering the shelter would be admitted, and the human guests would be responsible for caring for their own pets. “They’re going to be on one side sleeping on cots, and the pets will be in crates, sleeping on the other side of the building,” explains Debbie Powers, a deputy coordinator for the Arlington County OEM.

The trailer broadens the AWLA’s mission but also fits with the shelter’s longstanding focus on helping pets in the community through programs such as low-cost spay/neuter and assistance for people who have a veterinary emergency they can’t afford. Sherman says the AWLA has “always had a pretty large component of outreach to the community, and not just care for the animals that happen to be in our shelter.”

It makes sense for the AWLA to operate the pet portion of an emergency shelter because its staff and volunteers know how to care for animals and handle such procedures as animal intake—complications that those accustomed to dealing with the human side of disaster response may not be ready for. “I think there was a lot of difficulty in helping out with Katrina because there were volunteers that poured in, but they weren’t necessarily trained or familiar with how to deal with any of those tasks,” Sherman says. “We already have a corps of volunteers that know exactly what to do.”

The idea that animal shelters should be more involved in disaster preparedness has caught on in Northern Virginia, where a total of nine jurisdictions (four counties and five cities) banded together to obtain (through the Virginia Department of Emergency Management) a \$500,000 Homeland Security grant that helped each jurisdiction get its own trailer. The process began about two years ago, when the state and the region's emergency managers had a chance to obtain the money through Homeland Security's Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), says David Schwengel, director of regional emergency preparedness planning for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission. In discussions with state officials, the emergency managers identified care for animals during human evacuations as an issue that needed to be addressed, according to Schwengel. The Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act passed by Congress in 2006 requires state and local emergency plans to include the needs of people with household pets or service animals in order to be eligible for federal disaster funds.

The nine jurisdictions (Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William counties, and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas, and Manassas Park) had to decide how they would spend the money, and whether they would act separately or take a regional approach, says Thomas Koenig, director of Loudoun County's Department of Animal Care and Control. The group opted for a regional approach, using the bulk of the money to purchase the trail-

ers and supplies, in the interest of creating a system where the localities can easily work with each other, Koenig says.

The trailers are all the same size and loaded with the same supplies, and the coalition members participated in a regional training and a drill simulating an emergency. If one locality has to call for help in a disaster, the others can step in to set up and manage the pet-friendly shelter, right down to the paperwork, Koenig says. Adds Schwengel: "We know how to support each other, because we have the same approach throughout the region."

Schwengel says the collaborative effort on the grant involved a seemingly endless stream of meetings, phone calls, and e-mails, but the process strengthened the participants' working relationships. "These people know each other so well now," he says. "They kind of knew each other before this, [but] by working on this together, I would say that there are some very, very strong relationships in place now, and that, I think, is the bedrock of emergency preparedness."

### Stormy Weather?

Northern Virginia isn't known for severe weather, so why does it need all these trailers?

That's the kind of thinking that can lead to trouble. Few people think a disaster will occur in their community, until it actually happens. And in the case of Northern Virginia, shelter officials say the region isn't immune to natural or manmade situations that can prompt evacuations. Situated outside of Washington, D.C., the region neighbors a prime terrorist target and could also be called on to help cope with the aftermath of an attack. The area also occasionally experiences flooding and tropical storms, notes Michael Lucas, Fairfax County's director of animal control. When Hurricane Isabel hit the Washington, D.C., area in 2003, Lucas says it reminded officials that "yes, natural disasters can strike this far up north. We can have some severe flooding. People can be displaced. People are gonna need to find temporary shelter, and people want to take their pets."

The region experienced unusually heavy snow last winter, Koenig adds, and a fire or tornado could shutter the animal shelter and force the county to set up a temporary facility at a school or fairgrounds.

The region also has animal hoarders and puppy mills, Lucas says, noting that in cases where large numbers of animals are seized, it's helpful to set up a command post on the scene. Fairfax County has two trailers, the first of which it purchased with county funds shortly after Katrina, says Lucas. Larger and more elaborate than the trailers purchased with the Homeland Security money, it can hold about 30 cages and is loaded with an office, a generator, inside and outside lighting, air conditioning, and a tarp that would enable the setup of an outdoor registration table. The county has used it on several hoarding cases and to complement a human shelter in flooding situations.



MICHAEL LUCAS/FAIRFAX COUNTY

Northern Virginia can make use of its disaster pet trailers (like this one, shown during an exercise in Fairfax County) because the area is not immune to emergencies where people are forced to evacuate their homes and want to bring their pets.



Animal Welfare League of Arlington staff members unload crates from an emergency trailer during an exercise at a school in Northern Virginia. If a disaster forced officials to set up a human shelter, the trailer's supplies could help make it pet-friendly.

A jurisdiction's responsibilities don't end once it gets the equipment, Lucas says. Like firefighters, animal care and control personnel need to conduct exercises and gain hands-on experience with the equipment, "and not wait for that first event, when everything's going crazy, and then try to figure this stuff out."

The AWLA and Arlington County OEM, with assistance from the local chapter of the American Red Cross, ran an exercise in May 2008 called Frosty Paws, in which workers simulated an emergency response to a winter storm that caused a power outage. The practice run involved about 50 volunteers posing as evacuees—some with pets (stuffed animals and a few pet dogs), others without. The exercise required workers to set up a pet-friendly shelter, check people and pets in and out, then break down the operation, clean the facility, and pack up the trailer.

The setup at a local middle school involved covering the hallway floor and walls with plastic and running a rubber runner down the middle for a walking space, Lucas explains. Crates and registration tables had to be set up, and workers photographed every animal, wrote a description, put a cage card on every crate, and placed a neck-band ID on every dog and cat. Owners got an ID bracelet with the same number as their animal.

Sherman says about a half dozen people were assigned to setup and registration, and officials found that wasn't enough—a useful thing to know for the future. "What we discovered is that that takes a lot of people," Sherman says.

"I think in doing it again, we would want to have more help for setup and breakdown."

The regional group held a similar exercise in November, with all nine jurisdictions participating and a host of observers (including emergency planners) on hand to evaluate. Koenig, who served as one of the evaluators, said the staffers participating in the exercise worked well together—even keeping the natural bottleneck at the intake area manageable.

"We've proved that you can pull everybody together and make this work," Koenig says. "Because at the end of the day, we kind of leave our hats at home, and come in with a new hat that says: Pull together as a region. ... Create a sense ... among the region that in the event [that] anything happens, our partners will be there to help us out."

### Trying This At Home

Northern Virginia officials say in developing emergency plans and acquiring equipment, you don't need to reinvent the wheel, and make sure you talk to your jurisdiction's emergency managers.

"There's no reason to have to come up with this from scratch, because there are models out there," Sherman says. Obtaining a trailer is definitely a partnership with local government officials, who likely already have disaster contingency plans. "What we did is really just say to them, 'We need to include animals,'" she says. "... Our county was very receptive to that, and has been very, I think, happy to include us in those plans, which is great."

Not every region will be able to obtain UASI money (which is targeted to urban areas), but animal welfare officials anywhere can work with their jurisdictions' emergency managers and other government officials familiar with the grant-making process. Lucas says his office communicates regularly with the county emergency management office and the grants coordinator for the police department, who help ensure that forms are filled out properly. "We know that there's money available, but it might involve you going to a meeting of the emergency managers, and talking about things, and putting on a PowerPoint presentation, and expressing your needs," he says. The idea is to help managers see the importance of preparing for the region's animal sheltering needs during an emergency.

Responding to an emergency, of course, is something you hope you never have to do, but it's prudent to be prepared.

Koenig is confident that Northern Virginia has made strides in the right direction. He says a year ago his county could have put together a pet-friendly shelter, but now it can do one the *right* way. Workers from other localities or national organizations could come in and easily aid in the care of animals. "That level of readiness was necessary," he says. "We didn't have it before." 🐾