EXIT STRATEGIES
PREPARATION CAN HELP KEEP YOU AND YOUR PETS SAFE AND CALM IN A CRISIS // BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON // ILLUSTRATION BY SHAINA LIEBERMAN

THE HEAT OUTSIDE was a sizzling 113 degrees when Wanda Merling’s air conditioning stopped working. Before long, the thermostat inside her Phoenix home topped 99 degrees. She and her husband were hot and grumpy. Their three dogs were panting and lethargic, despite having ice bags to lie on.

Nighttime brought little relief. The next day, as temperatures soared, the dogs showed more serious signs of heat stress. They guzzled water yet didn’t have to go to the bathroom. They no longer wanted to venture outside. “That was when we knew it was time to go,” says Merling.

She and her husband packed a few personal items, grabbed their dogs’ “go bag” and drove to a hotel they knew would accept their two pit bulls and mastiff-boxer mix. The dogs had everything: food, toys and comfy blankets. Inside their air-conditioned room, everyone perked up.

“We were thankful we had everything ready to go,” Merling says. “Because frankly, it was too hot to even try to remember everything we may have needed.”

Few of us expect to leave home in a hurry. Merling certainly didn’t. She lived in a city where natural disasters are rare. But emergencies aren’t limited to the floods, tornadoes and wildfires that make headlines. Anyone, anywhere can suffer a home fire, gas leak or power outage. That’s why Merling, HSUS senior manager of disaster response, urges all pet owners to be prepared to evacuate at a moment’s notice.

Merling first developed a disaster plan when she lived in a hurricane-prone area of South Carolina. Advice from a pet store manager convinced her to pack an emergency kit for her dog, Yeyo, that included her medications and other necessities.

These days, her kit includes her dogs’ vaccination records and other medical information, a list of hotels that accept multiple large dogs and an emergency contact list. She’s also packed extra collars and leashes so she doesn’t have to search the house in an emergency. A photo of her family with the dogs proves they’re hers if they become separated. She updates the photo annually and rotates food and medications to keep them fresh.

Before joining The HSUS, Merling worked in disaster relief for PetSmart Charities. In both jobs, she’s witnessed how people and pets can suffer in emergencies. She’s also heard numerous close-call stories from people like Debbie Gabbard.

In 2011, Gabbard and her husband lost their home and most of their belongings during catastrophic flooding in Memphis, Tennessee. Officials had sent a 72-hour evacuation notice, but the couple didn’t think the waters would breach their property. Then early one morning, the Gabbards awoke to still-rising, knee-deep water outside their mobile home. The couple had no...
disaster plan. No clothes or toiletries packed. And no pet supplies ready to go.

After throwing a few items in their vehicle—plus their Chihuahua and a crate holding their two cats—they drove to higher ground and dropped off enough of their belongings to make room for the two pit bulls they’d left behind. But by then, the water had risen too high for the couple’s small truck. “It was coming up over the hood,” remembers Gabbard. Luckily, her brother arrived with his large Ford F150, and they were able to retrieve the dogs. “I shudder to think what would have happened if not for my brother,” she says.

The next day, Gabbard took her dogs and cats to an emergency shelter for the pets of displaced flood victims. During visits to the shelter, she met Merling, who shared information about disaster planning for pets.

“No, things are totally different,” Gabbard says. She keeps a supply bag and kennels in accessible places. And she has a list of shelters and people she can contact for help in an emergency. “Your pets are your family,” she says. “They can’t take care of themselves. They depend on us.”

**READY, SET, PREPARED**

**DISASTER PLANNING TIPS FOR PET OWNERS**

**DISASTER HAPPENS.** First, prepare an emergency plan that includes taking your pets. Map out evacuation routes and identify pet-friendly hotels, boarding kennels, vet clinics and homes of friends and family along those routes. A dry run of your plan is a good idea, says Lindsay Branscombe of East Haven, Connecticut. Knowing that seven carriers would fit in her car helped keep Branscombe calm when she and her husband packed up their five cats and two dogs during Hurricane Sandy.

**WORST-CASE SCENARIO.** Since you may not be home when disaster strikes, place rescue stickers on a prominent window or door to alert emergency workers to your pets’ presence. Keep a list on hand of family, friends and neighbors who can help evacuate your pets if you’re not available. Make sure your pets are wearing up-to-date ID tags and are microchipped in case you become separated, and put your contact information on all pet carriers.

**ESSENTIALS AT HAND.** Prepare an emergency kit with pet food and water for at least five days, leashes and collars, litter boxes, medications and other basics. (Even if you think you’re only going to be gone a few days, you may not have access to the pet supplies you’ll need, so pack accordingly.) Include copies of your pets’ medical records, a list of housing alternatives, current photos and descriptions of your pets, and contact information for your vet, family and friends. In case you have to board your pets or place them in foster care, type up details about their feeding schedules and any medical or behavioral issues. Store all papers in a waterproof bag.

**EASY ACCESS.** If you know you may be forced to evacuate, put your pets in one location. Before Hurricane Sandy hit, Branscombe corralled her cats into one room so they wouldn’t be hard to find. “It took 10 minutes to get everyone into their crate and 10 minutes to load them into the car,” she says.

For equines and other large animals, practice loading them on a trailer before disaster hits. Animals who are used to the process will be easier to evacuate.

*CHECK OUT* our disaster checklist, and pledge to take your pets with you in a disaster, at humanesociety.org/beprepared.