

Pets in Comprehensive Disaster Planning: The Post-Hurricane Katrina Experience

 See also Kim-Farley, p. 1448, and the *AJPH Hurricane Katrina 15 Years After* section, pp. 1460–1503.

Before Hurricane Katrina, the City of New Orleans, Louisiana, had emergency preparedness plans that focused on the care of pets in shelters. With required evacuation of the city, pets of families without transportation or other options were left behind or became separated. Many people refused evacuation efforts to remain with their pets, some to their own peril. People take great risks by refusing to evacuate and by seeking to retrieve pets.¹ Including pets in disaster plans can benefit pet owners' physical and mental well-being, ensure an adequate workforce, and prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases and other consequences of unattended pets.^{1,2}

As a direct consequence of Katrina, Congress passed the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006 (PETS Act; Pub L No. 109–308, HR 3858). The PETS Act and related legislation at the national, state, and local levels provide authorization and resources for care of pets and planning for disasters and emergencies. Following the guidance of the PETS Act and lessons learned from the experience of Katrina, the City of New Orleans prepared a new evacuation plan for humans and animals.

Three years later, Hurricane Gustav put the new plan to the

test. People without other means of transportation brought their pets to parish pickup points. Owners and their pets received bar-coded wristbands and had their information entered into databases. People rode on buses and pets rode on trucks destined for the same sites. The basic requirements of a functional plan were met: people understood the plan, an adequate number of carriers and vehicles were available for pets, and few pets were lost in the process.^{3,4}

Ten years later and 350 miles west of New Orleans, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, Texas. Animals were included in evacuation efforts, but not all of the lessons of Katrina and Gustav for pets were learned. State animal plans were not available online and local plans were not known to key officials.⁵ There was a shortage of pet shelters and available staff.⁶ The key underlying issues were a lack of coordination and databases and the lack of widespread training and exercises.

After Gustav and Harvey, New Orleans further revised its plans to include people with medical needs and to provide more details on plans for the care of pets. The city developed a special needs registry to identify people who

would need extra assistance because of medical or mobility issues. The registry includes information about pets. Because medical shelters do not allow pets, the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (LA-SPCA) will take custody of pets in the registry, which will then go to a women's prison that operates a pet shelter or an animal hospital for pets with medical needs. To ensure appropriate pet shelters and available staff, the New Orleans Health Department and LA-SPCA now work with each proposed shelter to prepare for the care of pets, including cohabitation of people and pets where appropriate, and to address any concerns.

As is the case for most cities, New Orleans' plan and system for pets focuses on cats and dogs. Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) definition of household pets also includes birds, rabbits, rodents, and turtles. It does

not include other reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, arachnids, or farm animals. Subject to owners having proper cages and the ability to manage temperature control, New Orleans can manage some additional animals. However, only care for pets on FEMA's list is available for emergency reimbursement. State and local plans should all be aware of FEMA rules. The rules themselves provide a checklist of items for inclusion in plans: supplies, labor, equipment, emergency veterinary services, transportation, shelter safety and security, cleaning, restoration, and cataloging and tracking systems. Properly documented and reasonable costs of evacuation and sheltering of pets are eligible for FEMA reimbursement.

Training and practice are essential components of planning. Louisiana has developed training for staff and volunteers and protocols to assist pet owners. Public health staff now conduct annual training sessions for pet owners and shelter volunteers, sessions that were previously only available to evacuation or fire department personnel. Among the seven Medical Reserve Corps units in Louisiana, the Louisiana State Animal Response Team Veterinary Medical Reserve Corps is statewide and dedicated to the care of animals. The

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Animal Response Team Veterinary Medical Reserve Corps trains people for shelters where animals will land and trains people to manage all of the required paperwork. Annual exercises include triage, tracking, and moving to shelter sites.

There are a number of guides available for communities to use in developing plans.¹ New Orleans has made its plans and recommendations for pet owners available online.⁷ Rather than starting from scratch, the New Orleans model has been tested and can be modified by other communities as bases for their own plans.

Given what we now know about the importance of pets in the lives of families and the actions that can be taken to protect pets and families, good public health preparedness needs to include planning and training for pets. The lessons learned in New Orleans have resulted in plans that are available to communities at risk for disasters. **AJPH**

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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