

On the Positive Side

Some pet procedures were in place ahead of Hurricane Katrina

For the Sun-News

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This week has seen the five-year anniversary of the devastation Hurricane Katrina wrought on New Orleans and its population. Many thoughtful reviews have appeared in the press, on television and online, delving deeply into the history of Katrina, analyzing the natural and man-made components of the disaster, and evaluating the efficacy of our disaster response.

These analyses give valuable help in planning for the future, with an emphasis on preparedness and on learning from past mistakes.

As the Katrina crisis developed five years ago, animal lovers and professionals from across the United States became involved in efforts to rescue and care for pets that were exposed to the dangers of flooding and abandonment.

At the Coliseum, services in Baton Rouge, La., began with a wild scramble under the direst conditions. More than 2,000 animals were processed in a six-week period. Temperatures were 90 to 100 degrees, with 90 percent humidity.

A group at Louisiana State University has prepared a comprehensive guide to emergency animal services based on the experiences of the District 6 Emergency Animal Shelter at the LSU Agcenter's Parker Coliseum in Baton Rouge after Hurricane Katrina.

The LSU group has compiled a detailed guide which they have made available online at lsuemergencyanimalshelter.org

The site provides detailed instructions on how to use this comprehensive resource.

The basic elements of a disaster plan are discussed under the headings:

- Evacuation.
- Decontamination.
- Repair.
- Retraining.

In evaluating their successes, the LSU report emphasizes the vital help they received by turning early to others in animal care who had experience in dealing with natural disasters. Although much innovation was required by their enormous task, they weren't starting from scratch. Expertise was available on loan.

Public health issues were a concern from the beginning: not only sanitation, water supply and feeding but also preventing postural injury from cages that were too small, disease and bio-hazard control, ventilation and opportunity for exercise and socialization. The LSU recognized the need for engineering expertise from the outset. They advocate that all planning for the future include collaboration between veterinarians and public health officers.

The procedures they developed included a veterinary exam and treatment plan at intake; they also developed standard, simple forms for record-keeping. Their primary goal was to identify shelters at remote locations to which the animals, with proper documentation, could be transported.

In this massive operation, the LSU group paid particular attention to advantages from use of information technology. For example, the use of laptops at intake bypassed a large amount of paper record-keeping.

Las Cruces is not New Orleans, and we are not dealing with Hurricane Katrina. We do have a smaller-scale emergency situation at our shelter, and we can profit from what others have learned in dealing with the same problems.

Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the Animal Services Center, did just that. She invited a team from a national organization, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to visit the facility and help her explore ways in which they could collaborate and assist out shelter.

When the ASPCA toured the shelter on July 27, they found a number of conditions requiring immediate action:

- Overcrowding has pushed the limits of the space so animals do not get minimum space requirements.
- The level of animal care did not meet standards for management of disease or infection.
- Major repairs are needed on an immediate basis.
- Rodent infestation has rendered the double-wide trailer that has been used as an infirmary unusable; it cannot be rehabilitated.
- A thorough overhaul and upgrade of the ventilation system is urgently needed.

The ASPCA's recommendations for Las Cruces parallel those the LSU group came up with to meet the emergencies of the Katrina disaster: evacuate, decontaminate, repair and retrain. We could begin right now.

This column was submitted by the board of directors of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.