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## **Preparedness for pets**

Organizations, volunteers help animals get through emergencies

MODERN LIVING

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As JoAnn Griffin tended to the emotional needs of Southbridge residents who had been evacuated to an emergency shelter after severe flooding, she noticed something odd: an abundance of pets. It was October 2005, a month after Hurricane Katrina. People on the Gulf Coast had been forced to either abandon their animals or risk their lives to save them. Desperate pet owners had been stranded on the rooftops of their submerged houses, their dogs at their sides.

Ms. Griffin was aware that the presence of dogs and cats posed a problem in Southbridge, as it did in Louisiana. For health and safety reasons, she explained, the Red Cross does not permit pets in shelters for people.

As it happened, Ms. Griffin, a lifelong dog lover and president of the Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team, was particularly well poised to take action.

Her team quickly came to Southbridge to help displaced families with their pets. Working with the Red Cross of Central Massachusetts, members set up an animal shelter. They also helped the town's animal control officer interview victims to find out how many pets had been left behind.

"Right after the flooding occurred, people were agitated," Ms. Griffin, who lives in Douglas, recalled the other day. "That's when I made the recommendation: 'If we can help these people with their pets' needs, it might calm them.' That's what happened."

Ms. Griffin, along with people from other towns in southern Worcester County, formed the Central Massachusetts Disaster

Animal Response Team in 2003. But after Katrina, helping animals in times of disaster took on a greater sense of urgency. Many well-meaning people had rushed to the region to save pets without the proper training, creating what Ms. Griffin referred to as “chaos within chaos.”

That experience and the lessons it taught were of great value by the time the flood hit Southbridge.

A year later, the PETS Act, requiring local and state emergency responders to include household pets and service animals in their evacuation plans, had become federal law.

“It really did make people start thinking,” said Claudia McGuire, Northboro’s animal control officer for 32 years. Ms. McGuire subsequently formed a disaster animal rescue group in her town. Fires, floods and hazardous-materials spills qualify as disasters, and so do situations involving animal hoarding and puppy mills, according to Stephanie Hagopian, a regional director for The Humane Society of the United States. Not long ago, the humane society asked members of the Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team to assist in the care of 300 puppies rescued from a rogue breeding operation in Maine.

“All the animals that were healthy were moved to a separate location and a temporary shelter was set up,” Ms. Hagopian explained. “We put out a call for help within the New England network. The Maine case is an example of something that went really well.”

Along with Ms. Griffin’s group and the Northboro team, there are disaster animal groups in Spencer and Southboro. Last year, the Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team was awarded a \$40,000 grant from the state Department of Public Health to assist in developing teams in 74 communities in Central Massachusetts. Ms. Griffin and other members made presentations in Uxbridge and Leominster. “JoAnn and her group are very proactive,” remarked Kerry Clark, program manager for the region’s public health preparedness plan.

The best scenario in an emergency is for people to be prepared to take care of their pets themselves. Pet food should be included in a 72-hour emergency kit for home use, Mr. Clark said. Federal officials urge people to have equipment and supplies ready to take with them in the event of evacuation, as well.

For individuals and families who must leave their homes, the Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team has negotiated with area motels to allow pets. The Red Cross, which responded to 69 fires in the region last year, has repeatedly taken advantage of the arrangements. The list of motels is posted on the rescue team's Web site, <http://www.cmdart.org/>.

The Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team works closely with fire, police, emergency management and animal control officials. The group has provided area fire departments with duffel bags filled with pet food and treats, leashes, halters, blankets, gloves and flashlights, among other items. Team members are still seeking locations for emergency shelters and storage areas for equipment, particularly in the Worcester and Leominster areas. And the group can always use more volunteers, who can take on anything from rescue work to paperwork. It has 55 on its roster; a handful are active.

If a disaster overwhelms a local team, state authorities step in. The State of Massachusetts Animal Response Team is organized into seven groups serving different functions, among them search and rescue, providing veterinary services and instituting shelter operations. Barbara Legatowicz, director, said that for those who want to participate, it is most helpful to join a local team and help wherever needed.

But the state team — known by the acronym SMART — has had no shortage of volunteers. In 2005, the group held a conference and anticipated a turnout of 200.

“In the end, there were 325 people, and more on a waiting list,” Ms. Legatowicz said. “That’s how much care and compassion there is in the state for these kinds of issues.”

Numerous public and private groups, from the local level to the national level, provide a range of training to ensure that everyone understands the chain of command and participates in effective, coordinated responses, Ms. Griffin said. The Humane Society of the United States, for example, is offering a two-day emergency animal sheltering training program on March 29 and 30 in Worcester. Those 18 or older interested in animal disaster work are invited to attend.

Ms. McGuire recalled a mock disaster drill held in the fall in Boston by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

“We had to set up a shelter quickly,” she said. “We had people playing roles. They even brought over a horse from the Boston police that people could practice putting a halter on. It was chaotic for a while, but it was good.”

Such training served everyone well when Katrina evacuees and their pets were housed at Camp Edwards on the Cape. SMART volunteers set up three drop sites for donated supplies and equipment. The veterinary team gave every animal a physical checkup and appropriate vaccinations. All pets stayed with their humans, and a volunteer arrived daily to make sure the animals were taken care of.

The Central Massachusetts Disaster Animal Response Team’s Becky Kalager, who owns and boards horses at her Douglas farm, helped out with dogs, cats, a bird, an iguana and a python. “How do you give a python a bath without it getting really mad at you?” she said, laughing at the recollection.

Ms. Griffin, who works with both people and pets in traumatic situations, said helping animals is nothing if not rewarding. “At some point or other I can assume humans can have a voice and speak,” she said. “The animals can’t. Somebody has got to be an advocate.”