

Innovation Responds: Red Paw Emergency Relief

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Philadelphia has many emergency response teams, but until recently, pets weren't part of that response. Red Paw Emergency Relief Team, in partnership with the Red Cross, provides emergency transportation, shelter, long-term foster care and emergency, follow-up and ongoing veterinarian care to foster and rescue pets. The program is spearheaded by Philadelphia firefighter and Red Cross emergency responder Jennifer Leary and began service on July 25, 2011. Since then, Red Paw has responded to nearly 200 calls in Philadelphia, Delaware, Montgomery, Bucks and Chester Counties.

The Issue

Failure to evacuate is a disaster management problem. Most human shelters will not accept companion animals. Thus, owners face the difficult choice of abandoning their pet(s) or remaining in potentially life-threatening situations. Several studies have found that animal owners risk endangering themselves by not evacuating disaster areas unless they are assured of their animals' well-being. Hurricane Katrina was a pet health and welfare disaster.

Rescued animals were found suffering from heartworm disease, internal and external parasites, dehydration, trauma, wounds from debris and standing water, malnutrition, lethargy and exhaustion according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. When rescued animals were transported to shelters around the country, it became more difficult for those shelters to find room for other animals in need (Thornton, 2006).

During Hurricane Katrina, when people had no alternative but to leave home, they had to decide if and where to take their animals. In many cases, this decision was imposed on the owner by emergency evacuation rules that denied pet transportation and shelter outside of the impact zone (Thornton, 2006). Thousands of Katrina survivors clinging to their pets were told by emergency workers to leave them behind. Some did, but others refused, choosing to stay with their animals despite dangerous conditions (Mott, 2005).

"Local authorities now realize, after many years of hearing it from the AVMA and other organizations preparing for animals in disasters, that people will risk their lives for their animals," says Cindy Lovern, a veterinarian and assistant director of scientific activities for the AVMA. "In future disasters, national, state and local authorities have to consider animals when considering the evacuation of people. The two are tied together intimately. Leaving them behind should not be an option," Lovern says (Mott, 2005).

A major finding from Katrina was that pet loss was a greater risk factor for depression or PTSD than was home loss (M. Hunt, personal communication,). Perhaps the definition for family has evolved over the years to include pets? "Pets are part of people's families—sixty-three percent of American households have at least two point three pets" (J. Leary, personal communication,). The Humane Society of the United States cited a recent Zogby International poll that found that 49 percent of adults say they would refuse to evacuate if they couldn't take their pets with them (Associated Press, 2009).

The Solution

Nationally, the House of Representatives passed the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act as a bipartisan initiative requiring states seeking Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance to accommodate pets and service animals in their emergency evacuation plans.

Regionally, the Red Paw Emergency Relief Team began in 2011. Jennifer Leary, a Philadelphia firefighter, Red Cross emergency responder and Philadelphia County Animal Response Team (CART) member led the efforts. Not only does she adore animals, she wanted to combine her two passions:

Two specific incidents sparked Red Paw's birth. A few years ago, a two-alarm fire in Center City resulted in the

death of two dogs and a cat because there was not a procedure in place to help them. The second incident occurred in January 2011 at a three-alarm fire at an apartment complex in West Philly. Cats were being taken out of the building in laundry baskets and rushed to the shelter without crates or emergency vet care. Dozens of cats were trapped in the building for weeks afterwards. Shortly after that fire, Leary brought her proposal for Red Paw to the American Red Cross—to work in conjunction with their responders when there are pets on scene (Red Paw, 2013).

Although the new initiative had its challenges, the Red Cross was “very open and willing to have Red Paw start. It's not every day a new emergency response organization comes along and can show up at a disaster scene. I think people were skeptical about how it would work. Because of my background,” the transition went smoothly, Leary said, adding that Red Paw is not a first responder. First responders assess the situation and if animals need assistance, Red Paw volunteers arrive.

Using the networks that were so valuable in the creation of the organization, Leary said she still relies on the interconnections in the animal welfare community. “PAWS is always there if we have to rush an animal in as well as City Kitties. The veterinarian from the [Philadelphia] Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals helps. There is a growing relationship with Animal Care and Control Team of Philadelphia. The animal community is a

great community. There is a real sense of solidarity," she said.

Despite all of the collaboration, Leary said she wasn't quite sure her social venture would make it. "Last winter was really bad. We had been getting animals in cycles; every single call was for 1 or 3 or 6 displaced pit bulls." As with every initial start-up, they had to learn while doing. "We didn't have the type of fostering network that we have now or the Facebook presence. All the dogs we had...we were bleeding money. We couldn't bring in money quickly enough and couldn't get the dogs out quickly enough. By April and May, we ended up getting most of the dogs adopted. We were teetering on the brink. This year it's been all cats," she said.

Despite the challenges, many are looking to Red Paw as a model. Red Paw is "already growing quicker than I intended. It was supposed to be a pilot program in Philadelphia, but we were called three times by two other counties. It just ended up expanding to all five counties. We don't want to grow quicker than we're capable of growing. I'm working through ways to help people who inquire about starting their own chapter," she said, indicating that Red Paw chapter creation is the way for sustainable growth.

Measuring growth, Leary has been collecting Red Paw performance measures including outcomes since the day they began. "We have numbers from the day we started.

When we hit our first full year of service [Jan 2011–Jan 2012], we posted numbers on the website (redpawemergencyreliefteam.com). We're now in the process of going through a year's worth of paper putting it into Excel sheets [as well as] going back through Facebook posts to make sure cases we're matching up. Now we have a great system. Every case gets documented in Google Docs. Every time I get a call, I take all the information down, and what the final outcome was."

Although Red Paw's extensive network within the animal welfare community has been a big part of the venture's success, the relative youth of the organization and its lack of financial security make it vulnerable. "...an organization is more likely to increase the degree of formality of its collaborative activities when it is older, has a larger budget size, receives government funding but relies on fewer government funding streams, has more board linkages with other nonprofits, and is not operating in the education and research or social services industry" (Guo & Acar, 2005, p. 1). Whether Red Paw follows this trend or bucks it only time will tell.

Perhaps we can glean hints from its response to Superstorm Sandy, during which Red Paw's reach extended to New Jersey and New York. "We supplied volunteers for the CART pet co-located shelters. We responded to a dozen calls for displaced pets and made two trips to New Jersey and New York delivering thousands of pounds of pet food and supplies we

collected," said Leary.

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