

The Need of Clear Command and Direction

Lack of clear command and direction manifest themselves as conflicting or confusing instructions to the public, e.g., on whether to evacuate with or without animals, where help is available, and information on threats and risks to people and animals alike. This type of confusion originates when there is not an established Incident Command that includes addressing the needs of animals and their owners.

Communities that have not engaged in appropriate planning or mitigation for the needs of animals and their owners in disasters often find themselves without a qualified or experienced person overseeing animal issues during the response to a disasters, and, therefore, animal issues are predictably disregarded by emergency management officials during a response. This can result in actions ranging from an inaction (a common problem with State Animal Health Officials without explicit authority over healthy pets); bad decisions, such as to kill stray animals (a common problem with unsympathetic law enforcement) or when inexperienced helpers incorrectly assess the severity of injuries; external groups taking charge and prioritizing response operations to fit their objectives rather than those of the community; and misuse of critical human and equipment resources by unqualified or inadequately trained responders. Appropriate planning should identify these potential short falls and develop a path by which to implement appropriate mitigation measures that establish adequate authority over decisions and resources.

During the response to large scale disasters and during exercises many volunteers offer their services; this is particularly true for the care of animals. It is not uncommon in large scale events in the U.S. for people to travel long distances to offer help for animals. Although all of the volunteers are willing to help, history has shown that many volunteers who lack credentials or experience can hinder response operations and endanger human lives. Adding to that the media and much of the literature on animals in disasters reinforces stereotypical thinking of why animals become victims of disasters by focusing on the excitement of response, rather than concerning themselves with obvious underlying conflicts in the way Americans live with animals. For example, the length of time that a person owns a pet in the US is considerable shorter than the pet's life, which is an indicator that pet relinquishment is a common cultural phenomenon and representative of the reason we see recurring problems with stray animals in disasters. Although much of the literature on animals in disasters is quick to justify the ad hoc care of animals in disasters under the guise of a lack of commitment towards animals by emergency management personnel, this is misleading. More commonly emergency managers are looking for partners with whom they can permanently address the root causes of vulnerabilities for a community including its animals.

Although neither experience nor credentials can be acquired quickly, not having these skills should not be a reason to turn away willing help. We recommend that as part of the official preparedness and response to disasters volunteer managers with animal care backgrounds are identified who can assess volunteers' skills and preferences and incorporate them into needed services. Directors of animal shelters, veterinary practices and other animal care businesses are particularly suited for the role of volunteer manager and these can be trained to become official members of the Incident Command.