

Evacuations from an Animal Care Business

Veterinary practices, humane shelters, pet stores, and any other businesses may have to evacuate animals in addition to persons.

Table 13-2 Examples of general knowledge staff should have about disasters

Hazardous materials

What chemicals and drugs are on site
Which of the chemicals and drugs interact to create more dangerous compounds
Appropriate absorbents to prevent spread of leaking materials
When a spill requires professional help for cleanup

Natural hazards

Common threats to the area
When threats are most likely
How to recognize pending natural disasters
What actions to take to ensure safety of self, other persons, and animals

General emergency management procedures

Who is responsible for dealing with an incident when it occurs
How to notify and protect other staff and clients in the building
When and how to call outside emergency services
How to secure the building, such as closing all doors in the case of fire, turning off the air conditioner or heating system, and closing all drawers and cabinet doors
How to secure records, such as shutting down the computer system and gathering critical records
How to establish temporary barriers with furniture after people have safely evacuated
When to evacuate and what procedures to invoke to evacuate safely
Location of fire extinguishers and how to use them
Location of storage areas for chemicals and underground storage tanks
How to prevent back flow from sewers, sumps, and collection tanks

Organization of evacuations

Evacuations have their own dangers and should not be taken lightly. They should be rehearsed and become part of the regular standard of care provided to patients and boarders. All staff should be familiar with the conditions under which an evacuation would be necessary and what the procedures are. Examples include hazardous materials spill, fire, natural hazards (both in the building and in the surrounding environment), and crime. Details of how to deal with each of these should be discussed in regular staff meetings. To facilitate correct actions in a disaster the emergency phone number can be permanently posted next to all phones that may be used in a disaster. This number is not always 911.

Evacuations should be supervised. Therefore a clear chain of command is necessary. Responsibilities should be designated. The following are examples of important responsibilities to assign to specific persons:

- To call for help (911 or other emergency numbers)
 - To shut down the business (turn off air conditioner, heat, computer, oxygen, anesthesia, etc.)
 - To maintain critical business operations (e.g., for patients in cages and animals under anesthesia)
 - To count all staff who report to the assembly site
- Evacuation procedures should be

reviewed regularly. One method for updating and maintaining evacuation plans is to assign a different permanent employee to review and upgrade the plan every year. That way, eventually every permanent employee will become completely familiar with the tasks and responsibilities of evacuation safety.



Evacuation plans for veterinary practices should first address human safety. Here, a person being carried through floodwaters is an example of a late evacuation. (Photo by Kerri Marshall.)

Evacuation route

Evacuation routes must be able to start from anywhere in the building and converge on a single prearranged site (the assembly area). Planning an escape route should start with considering where staff, clients (humans), and patients (animals) are likely to be, which route they should take to get out of the building as quickly and as safely as possible, and where they will meet once outside the building. In veterinary practices special consideration should be given to clients who may be in the building and to the needs of staff and clients who have disabilities or who do not speak English. Restrooms should always be checked before an evacuation is considered complete. Evacuation routes should be posted in each room so that all staff members know where the designated routes are. These diagrams may be less important for directing persons to the safest route should an evacuation be necessary than for showing staff members which areas in a building are evacuation routes that need to be kept unobstructed at all times. In an evacuation a copy of the business floor plan also will be useful to firefighters and other emergency responders who have to enter the building. For this purpose it is best if the floor plans indicate where hazardous materials, including oxygen and pressurized gases, are stored and where the shutoff valves and switches are.

Floor plans can be kept with other important safety data (i.e., the MSDSs) in secured boxes on an outside wall of the business, where the fire department and other emergency responders can find the information even if the owner or employees are not present. Businesses can make arrangements with the fire department so that firefighters know which key to the box to use.

Evacuation routes should be wide enough for all staff and clients to pass through. If equipment will be used in an evacuation (beds, stretchers, cages), the passageways should be wide enough for these to pass. Evacuation routes should not expose persons or animals to additional hazards. Exit should be through doors that are unlocked during regular working hours. Access to safe places outside the building must be free of obstructions at all times.

Evacuation of animals must be a team effort, and at no point should human lives or safety be endangered to save animals. Practices and shelters should think about how they would transport and secure the typical number of animals they house at any time. In a typical small-animal

practice this may include dogs, cats, birds, and other exotic animals. Many animals are difficult to transport. Animals attempting to escape can be a problem. All hospitals should think about how they would handle aggressive animals that have to be muzzled or caged before evacuation. Exotic animals that depend on artificial environments or water to survive also need special attention.

In many hospitals contingency plans should be developed for animals under anesthesia. Animals undergoing surgical procedures at the time of an evacuation require special consideration, depending on the stage of surgery and whether evacuation would result in a threat to the animal's life (e.g., from severe wound contamination or blood loss). First the state of surgery and the threat to the animal's life should be determined. If evacuation poses a risk of severe wound contamination, pain, or blood loss, the patient may be left on a safe level of anesthesia without supervision while the building is evacuated. Alternatively, when interruption is not life threatening, the animal can be taken off anesthesia and put in a cage. In either case the protocols should be worked out ahead of time. In cases where animals are conscious but cannot be evacuated (e.g., horses in slings in a barn fire), the animals may have to be euthanized to prevent suffering.

Assembly site

At the assembly site all persons should be accounted for, including employees, clients, service personnel, delivery service personnel, and visitors. One person should be assigned to each area of the practice and should report on that area.

One person should have the responsibility for notifying all staff members' families so that they know everything is OK. (Frequently fires and other evacuations are covered on the television news, and it is important for families to know the status of the employees, who may be held up and return home late.) The names of people who are not accounted for should be given to the incident commander. When all is safe, everybody will need to be able to get home. Often vehicles parked close to buildings are also damaged in fires, so that persons do not have transport home. This too should be taken into consideration. Finally, clients not on site should be contacted to inform them of the status of their animals.

Special consideration should be given to the area where animals are assembled. Once the animals are outside the building, an established protocol should be followed to secure them. This may be easiest for dogs and some cats because they can temporarily be tied to fence posts, trees, or other nonmobile objects. Birds and reptiles, however, will need to be transported and secured in cages. A source for these cages should be determined ahead of time.

Someone has to supervise the animals so that they are not inadvertently left to the care of strangers while staff members attend to other issues. If pets are rescued from fires by firefighters, coordination should be established between the firefighters and staff. When firefighters rescue humans, the division of responsibilities is often clear. Firefighters enter the building to rescue humans and control the fire while emergency medical staff attend to victims who are brought out of the building. There have been cases where firefighters have rescued pets from burning veterinary practices and set them down in the parking lot unsupervised, assuming the procedure for animals to be the same as for humans, and the pets then escaped.