

Reuniting Animals and Owners

Abandoned Versus Lost Pets

Several factors indicated that many animals found after the Oakland firestorm were strays. Most striking was the large number of animals found without collars and tags and never reclaimed by owners. Pets with collars were over 12 times more likely to be reunited with their owners. This was not because the owners could be traced via the tag but because the owners came looking for their pets.

Owners were more likely to be reunited with their pets if they started to look for the pets soon after the fire, if they looked for the pets in several different places, and if the pets had been spayed or neutered. For every week that an owner was delayed in looking for a pet, the chance of being reunited decreased by about 50%. Responsible pet owners look for their pets. Animals that do not have caring, permanent owners are the animals most commonly picked up after disasters.

Lost Animals

For animals and owners that have been separated as a result of the disaster everything must be done to help reunite them. Conscientious owners will do everything they can to find their pets and they must be given every opportunity to do so, including being advised where known sightings of animals occurred, where pets are housed, and making available searchable online databases to identify and find their pets. However, part of challenge in reuniting lost animals with their owners is lack of standardized descriptions to be able to sort through databases.

Whereas owners often describe miniscule details of their pet's physique in the hope that these details will distinguish their pets, these details are often not initially helpful to responders having to screen hundreds of unfamiliar animals. Tools available through social media that convey real time information offer promising solutions to reunite lost pets with conscientious owners, but these tools are yet to prove themselves as affecting overall reunion rates.

One of the management challenges that animal shelters face in disasters is not adapting their adoption and euthanasia policies in a way that would support owners needing extra time to find and be reunited with their pet. Policies, i.e., a mitigation activity, should be adopted in disasters that allow shelters to extend the waiting period for release of pets for at least an additional 3 weeks after a disaster. And, in cases where the original owner cannot be found, new owners should be required to sign a fostering agreement for the first 6 – 12 months of care so that, should an owner emerge later, there are no questions about who the rightful owner is. Since both of these recommendations come with potential increased resource requirements it behooves animal shelters to become fully integrated into their community's emergency management system so that they become eligible for reimbursement for these transaction costs arising from these temporary policies.

Recommendations

To increase the chances of reunion, humane shelters for stray pets should be administered by the department of animal control in the county or municipality affected by the disaster. The location of these shelters should be advertised together with a deadline for lost pet retrieval. The recommended length of time that shelters should keep pets found in disaster areas is 3 weeks or 48 hours after Red Cross shelters close, whichever is shorter. After that time pets should be treated as abandoned and be handled according to local animal control policy.

Public education should address specific risk factors for pet evacuation failure. Dog owners

should be advised to promote a friendly relationship between their dogs and friends or family in an effort to establish a boarding place for the animals in the case of evacuation. Cat owners should be advised to purchase a carrier for each cat.