

Sheltering Pets in Disasters

There has been considerable discussion over the need to shelter pets in large-scale disasters. Part of the argument has been the public sentiment that pets are members of the family and should be treated as such in mass care facilities for humans after disasters. The problem is not quite that simple. Several issues should be clarified before providing shelter for pets in large-scale disasters:

- Is public health improved by offering to shelter pets?
- Is animal health improved by offering to shelter pets?
- What is the most cost-effective solution for sheltering pets in disasters?

Effect of sheltering pets on public health

Public health can be improved in two ways by offering to shelter pets. The degree to which these factors may be effective at improving public health is theoretic. First, offering pet shelters to the public may encourage more people to evacuate. However, research on actual evacuees conducted at Purdue University indicated that only 7% of pet owners failed to evacuate because they did not want to leave their pets behind. If all

of these evacuation failures could be prevented by offering shelter to pets, it would constitute approximately 1% to 3% of all evacuees. Of course some might reject the offer of a shelter because of a personal preference or for practical reasons.

The second way in which pet sheltering may improve public health is by increasing pet evacuation and therefore reducing the likelihood of pet owners trying to later rescue their pets from the disaster site. Our data indicate that approximately 25% of owners who evacuate return in an attempt to rescue their pets. This constitutes less than 10% of all persons who were ordered to evacuate. Clearly the more pets that are evacuated, the fewer pet owners who attempt pet rescues. However, failure to evacuate dogs or cats is related primarily to owners' inability to catch, transport, and place their pets, not to recommendations by emergency management officials. Therefore help with evacuation logistics is likely to be the most effective strategy to prevent pet rescue attempts.

Shelters are public facilities that are governed by local and state public health regulations. Most regulations governing public shelters specify that animals (other than registered working dogs) cannot be in the same space where food is served to humans. The location of animals has to be separated by at least two solid partitions (walls) from the area where humans eat. Many shelters can provide this arrangement by keeping pets in the basement, a separate room, or an outside building. The owner of the shelter must provide consent to allow animals into the facility.

Persons with allergies to or phobias about animals should be kept from unnecessary exposure to pets. In a small study we conducted during a Red Cross exercise we asked participants what they thought about keeping pets at shelters. Most pet owners, especially those who had more than one pet, were opposed to the idea. Although this response might be surprising, many responsible owners are aware that their pets may not get along with other persons or animals.

Effect of sheltering pets on animal health

If an environment has become unsafe for humans, the same applies to animals. Animal health is therefore improved in disasters when animals are evacuated. Again, however, the question arises as to whether offering to shelter pets would be an effective method for improving pet evacuation rates. At present the answer is unknown.

Placing animals in mass care facilities should be weighed against alternative approaches. Most studies on evacuation behavior, including those that have looked at where pet owners stay, show that over 80% of evacuees stay with friends and family. Therefore most pet owners already have opted for the best solution for their pets by having arranged accommodation for themselves and their pets in the event of a disaster. Encouraging this type of self-reliance is consistent with emergency management policy. It is possible that offering shelter for pets at mass care facilities would encourage pet owners to be less self-reliant and therefore promote an inferior standard of care for pets than would be available in the homes of friends and family. Determining which disaster victims have legitimate needs and which could find shelter on their own would be time consuming, and such discrimination would be considered unethical by most shelter operators.

Cost effectiveness of sheltering pets

Given limited resources for any public or animal health policy the cost effectiveness of programs has to be addressed. The question is whether offering shelter for pets is as cost effective as other alternatives. The best alternative is for pet owners to be self-reliant in disasters, which would obviate the need to provide care for their pets.

In some circumstances no alternatives to sheltering pets exist. These should be viewed as exceptions rather than as policy. An example is overnight sheltering of evacuees from a disaster site. Under these circumstances management of the shelter is usually ad hoc and most people leave within a few hours to return to their homes or to stay with friends, family, or at motels. Another example is a blizzard during which travelers rely on shelters as their only protection from the environment and cannot be turned away. Under these circumstances owners can be charged with supervision of their pets. In most blizzards, shelters are likely to open only for a few days and have few occupants until the roads have been cleared.

Another argument for pet friendly shelters is that they would help the most vulnerable disaster victims, senior and low-income members of society. Pet ownership is low in senior (approximately 25%) and low-income (30% to 40%) sectors of society when compared with the national average (over 50%). Although these are the groups most likely to request or require pet-sheltering facilities, they would not be the only persons who would use these services. Pets would be brought in for sheltering by persons who would otherwise be self-reliant in disasters, and the public would most likely bring stray animals to the shelters. Up to 80% of animals encountered by animal care groups in disasters are strays, so it is likely that many stray animals would be dropped off at any facility offering shelter for pets. The public does not distinguish between stray and owned animals.

A facility that offers shelter for pets in disasters would probably find that its greatest expense was for the care of stray animals and pets of owners who would have otherwise sought alternative accommodation. These costs should be addressed before a shelter is set up. At this point the cost effectiveness of a pet friendly shelter is only a matter for speculation, but I suspect that for every owner and pet that truly need shelter, another 5 to 20 owners would request or stray animals be brought in for the same services. Because of the small number of persons who would truly need help to shelter their pets, alternative resources to which those who actually need shelter can be referred are more cost effective. The American Red Cross Family Assistance program is an example of how this could operate. Here registered disaster victims are given vouchers for groceries, furniture, clothes, and temporary rental accommodation. If this type of program were expanded to include pet owners, it would take care of a large segment of the disaster victim population.

Shelter considerations

- Alternative housing for pets should be sought. A shelter should accept pets only if other accommodations cannot be found.
- Shelters should meet public health regulations. Rooms where pets are kept must be separated by at least two solid partitions from the place where food is served to humans.
- The shelter owner should agree to admit pets before the disaster and should work out ahead of time the details of where to house them.
- Suitable rooms for pets are basements, laundry rooms, garages, or tents.
- Stray animals (any animal without its owner present) fall under the jurisdiction of the department of animal control and should not be admitted to the shelter. They should be referred immediately to the department of animal control.
- The department of animal control should be informed of shelters to which animals may be brought. Animal control officials usually pick up stray animals at shelters or designate a site for them. It is best if people who find animals take them directly to this designated site.
- A professional licensed animal health care provider (veterinary technician or veterinarian) should supervise the sheltering of pets. Ideally this person is a registered and trained volunteer. A list of such professionals should be kept on file by shelter operators.

Owner and pet considerations

- Owners must accompany their pets at all times.
- A pet should be admitted to a shelter only if it cannot be cared for elsewhere. In some cases shelter for dogs and cats is coordinated through the local chapters of the American Kennel Club and Cat Fancier's Association.
- Owners should state in writing that they will follow the recommendations of the animal care supervisor at the shelter.
- Owners unwilling to adhere to the standards of the shelter should be asked to leave and should be referred to other facilities where they can pay for the services they request.
- Only basic First Aid should be provided to pets at the shelter. Sick animals should be referred to a veterinary practice.

Reducing the Need for Animal Sheltering

Evacuation orders and emergency management officials should always advise pet owners to take their pets with them. Pet owners should be advised to seek accommodations with friends, with family, or at hotels and motels. Recommendations that provide solutions to owners on how to care for their animals can be effective in providing better care for people. A common reason that pet owners leave their pets behind is that they think they will not be gone for long, but situations that are unsafe for people are unsafe for animals. Ultimately, however, pet owners, not emergency management officials, are responsible for the care of their animals.

Shelters for owned pets are probably unnecessary unless large human populations are displaced without alternative accommodation. In this case separate facilities should be sought for pets. Examples are county fairgrounds and parks, where tents can be set up. Local resources include tent and awning companies and the National Guard. Also, many existing shelter facilities for humans, such as churches and schools, have adequate facilities to shelter owners and their

pets.