

Saving Pets = Saving People: Lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina

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The Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (LA/SPCA) is Louisiana's largest animal welfare organization, a private non-profit, and also New Orleans' long-standing animal control agency. It's New Orleans' lead animal protection and animal disaster response organization and was the responsible agency during Hurricane Katrina.

Prior to Katrina's strike upon New Orleans, the LA/SPCA managed many shelter evacuations, sometimes two in the same season. Just a few months prior to Hurricane Katrina, the LA/SPCA evacuated its facility for Hurricane Dennis moving hundreds of animals to partner shelters in another part of Louisiana and the neighbouring states of Texas and Mississippi. Unlike previous evacuations, however, Katrina's quick path change required that we move all 263 dogs and cats to the Houston SPCA, about an eight-hour drive from New Orleans. We did not have time to implement our normal protocols separating animals involved in court cases from those that are stray and available for adoption. This time, they all went to Houston.

As the television showed the levees crumbling from Katrina's surge, the LA/SPCA staff immediately moved to establish an emergency alternative animal recovery location at the Lamar Dixon Expo Center, approximately 97 kilometers from New Orleans. Although we managed successful shelter evacuations, we had never planned for the total destruction of our facility and city.

Colleagues from around the country came to our aid and began rescuing alongside our team. Chaos quickly ensued. Within days, about 2,000 animals were being managed each night. We could not humanely house anymore, but just outside the entrance, carloads and caravans of animal rescuers with a mix of skill-sets were waiting at the gates with literally hundreds of animals that had been rescued from New Orleans. There were many eager rescuers, but fewer willing to stay behind and care for those being sheltered. There was a mixture of chaos, frustration, and battling philosophies among the varying groups and individual rescuers.

Our animal control officers and animal care attendants were operating on little or no sleep. A large percentage of our staff had themselves lost everything they owned, yet they pushed on rescuing animals. The team has endured personal losses and witnessed horrific images that will last with them forever. They had seen emaciated animals too weak to stand, half eaten carcasses, and animals drowned in high waters with their bodies still tied the fences where they had been left. They encountered once friendly dogs gone feral from wandering the streets and suffering from extreme thirst and starvation. They had seen the neighbourhood that was their home totally destroyed, homes shifted off their foundation lying in the middle of the street.

The rescue lists grew by the thousands. The inability to communicate by land lines and the inability to install computer systems in those early days made it challenging to organize one central list that everyone could work from. The pleas to rescue trapped animals and move mountains to reunite owners with pets were overwhelming. The calls for help from people looking for their animals were often heartbreaking and unforgettable. It would be two full years before life began to settle and we would move into a new shelter with 80% new staff.

Our Katrina experience enabled us to develop a strong plan for

the future that would account for extreme losses while ensuring that mistakes were not repeated.

On the third anniversary of Katrina, August 2008, the LA/SPCA and the community had an opportunity to test its plans when Hurricane Gustav threatened New Orleans. The city's evacuation plan, which now included pets, was well implemented. Lessons learned were heeded and applied with success. Thankfully, Gustav did not require implementation of an integrated response plan, but had the storm devastated the region, the LA/SPCA and city were prepared.

The following outline highlights what worked, what did not, and key lessons learned.

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Our First 90 Days following Hurricane Katrina's Strike

The LA/SPCA's animal shelter in the hard-hit 9th Ward was destroyed.

- The LA/SPCA established the official animal rescue center at Lamar-Dixon Expo Center, approximately 97 kilometers from New Orleans, which became its temporary shelter for 45 days.
- The LA/SPCA established a second shelter in a damaged warehouse that would become its home for the next 1.5 years until a new facility could be designed and built.
- Nearly 80% of staff did not return as their lives were shattered; the remaining 20% of staff suffered deep losses.
- Thousands of well meaning outside animal rescuers provided aid, but also elicited great stress and concern among residents as many were taking pets who had returned with their owners. Many unregistered rescuers entered homes illegally.
- Rampant and incorrect internet rumors circulated around the country. The web and its bloggers changed the way disasters were perceived and handled.
- Massive food & water stations that were helpful early in the response became problematic in the months ahead. Food and water stations were intended to be a temporary measure to provide sustenance to roaming animals, but they became permanent fixtures by well meaning people ultimately making trapping remaining animals difficult. Three years later, food and water stations are still promoted and maintained by a local animal organization, which results in sustaining and multiplying free-roaming populations.

There were several aspects of Katrina's disaster planning and response that worked well. They included:

- The evacuation of the LA/SPCA's shelter. We had an excellent tried and true evacuation plan regularly moving 250-300 dogs and cats across state lines.
- The incorporation of the LA/SPCA's staff in the Emergency Operations Center, which enabled us to participate in planning discussions.

- The establishment of a pet shelter for those who evacuated with pets and needed a place for their owned animals.
- The rescue of an estimated 15,000 animals by all participating groups.
- The reunification of approximately 20% of rescued animals.
- The incredible nationwide financial support received by all groups.
- The professional support and help provided by sheltering partners.

There were many lessons learned by emergency officials leading the overall response. Officials noted the following:

- People died because they refused to leave pets behind. A poll by the Fritz Institute advised that 44% of those who chose not to evacuate stated that they stayed for their pets whereas 18% chose to stay for family.
- People who left pets behind risked their lives to re-enter city in hopes of rescuing their companions.
- People trying to re-enter city hindered human rescue efforts.
- Military was ill equipped to deal with roaming and scared animals.
- Roaming dogs would disrupt rescue efforts as the free roaming dogs would approach cadaver dogs that were being used to recover bodies.
- Without planning and coordination, pets and people may never get reunited and people and service animals become separated.
- The dollar cost and emotional toll for not managing the pet aspect is incredibly high. The associated trauma was catastrophic.



29 Guide Dogs

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Lesson 1: Include Animals in Planning

Although the LA/SPCA had an excellent shelter evacuation plan, we did not plan to lose our facility and operate an external rescue site. We never planned for extreme devastation or the need for outside help. Although responsible for disasters involving animals, we operated independently from the Urban Search and Rescue Teams.

Lessons learned by animal agencies and municipalities included:

- Provide staff training in the U.S.'s Incident Command structure and system. The minimum requirements for animal staff include courses ICS 100, 200. Supervisors are required to take the additional coursework in IS 700 and 800. (See <http://training.fema.gov> for details)
- Municipalities must appoint an animal agency to serve as the official lead in animal rescue and response. (The LA/SPCA was the official responder in New Orleans, but surrounding communities affected by Katrina had not assigned a lead agency.)
- Animal responders must be included in planning and practice drills alongside human Search and Rescue teams. The two groups were not coordinated pre-Katrina, they did not know how to leverage each other's capabilities, which resulted in missed opportunities and wasted effort.

- Each municipality and responding animal agency must have an evacuation and response plan.

Lesson 2: Develop partnerships

The LA/SPCA enjoyed the great support of other animal agencies. Within weeks, however, there was great confusion about roles and responsibilities. To alleviate confusion and establish clear boundaries, partnerships can be strengthened by developing Memorandum of Understandings (MOU), local/regional/state response plans, back-up sheltering plans, and side-by-side animal/people shelters where organizations share in the management.

See the attached Response Plan for sample MOU's and response protocols.

Lesson 3: Develop communication plan & system

Many of the greatest challenges experienced during Katrina were related to communication. Mobile phone systems were inoperable across the region. We had limited ability to speak to one another and no ability to speak to fellow first responders.

As the CEO of the LA/SPCA, I reported to a board of directors and needed approval for major expenditures that were above my signing authority, but was unable to reach many of the board members as email and phone systems were down.

Residents desperate to advise the LA/SPCA about the location of pets left behind had no way to reach us. Calls were coming from all over the country to fellow humane agencies and thousands of names were on multiple lists. Some names could be on as many as five lists resulting in duplication of effort. There was no central dispatcher to ensure coordination when time was as critical as water.

Once on the road, out-of-town rescuers were unable to find addresses given to them as street signs were washed away.

Our website was receiving one million hits a day yet we were unable to respond since we did not have internet access. We had no way to update residents on the status of the rescue, how to reach us, or locate lost pets.

If a pet was rescued, we did not have an established system for notifying pet owners where their pets had been moved or sheltered. Thousands of people were visiting our rescue shelter each day seeking lost pets. Some people did so with malice and stole pets that were not their own.

The following actions are recommended:

- Develop a crisis communication plan so that staff may communicate with key stakeholders in a time of crisis. Back-up plans are required to account for downed phone lines.
- Communicate pre-storm evacuation shelter locations to the public at least 96 hours prior to the storm's expected strike.
- Employ back-up inter-operability system so that first responders may communicate with one another.
- Develop dispatch capability/work with the primary Emergency Operations Center (EOC) so that calls are routed and effectively dispatched.
- Establish out-of-state (800) phone number that can be activated if local phone lines are down.
- Establish a back-up website that can be accessed remotely if the primary computer systems are down.
- Use GPS system so first responders may easily find addresses. Post rescue locations in the EOC.

- Develop security protocols for residents who are seeking their rescued pets to ensure that the correct pets go home with their rightful owners.
- Develop a communication method with homeowners so they can be reunited with pets that were rescued during a disaster.
- Develop and require credentials for volunteers and partner agencies seeking to assist in the strike zone. Only credentialed rescuers should be permitted into the region, which ensures skilled teams and an understanding of the protocols being used.

Lesson 4: Educate the Public

The better the public is prepared for disasters, the less panicked they may feel at the time of an impending crisis. It will also reduce the potential burden that may be placed upon the government and community. Below are some steps that agencies can take to assist the public:

- Provide information on developing ready-to-travel kit for pets.
- Advise the public to ask their veterinarians or boarding facilities about their evacuation and response plans should disaster strike. Since hurricane season in the U.S. coincides with vacation time, many pets are boarded as owners travel. During Katrina, the majority of boarding facilities and veterinarians did not have an evacuation plan and many pets died in flood waters or from dehydration as staff were forced to leave animals behind.
- Develop integrated Public Service Announcements for radio/print/television that will highlight disaster preparedness messages and keep disaster preparedness top-of-mind.
- Participate in disaster awareness-raising events occurring in the community.
- Host microchipping events giving those with limited means an opportunity to have their pet chipped for free or at cost.
- Maintain an up-to-date website with information about evacuation locations, and provide updates on disaster response.

Lesson 5: Prepare for the Unexpected

The LA/SPCA had minimal supplies on hand to handle the devastation with which we were faced. Due to the size and scope of the disaster, we were unable to buy items such as computers, food, and other basics since the entire region was shutdown for days. We depended upon others to bring us supplies from hundreds and thousands of kilometers away.

Within days, we were overwhelmed with people who came to help from across the country as well as loads of unsolicited supplies and animal food. To ensure better utilization of resources in the future, it's recommended that agencies plan for the following:

- Stash ready-to-use supplies with partner agencies that are likely not to be affected by the same disaster.
- Develop a plan for managing unsolicited supply donations.
- Develop a plan for managing unsolicited volunteers.
- Establish an inventory system for managing supplies on hand.

Lesson 6: Establish a Public Relations/Communications plan

The LA/SPCA staff were focused on the work at hand, not documenting the rescue effort nor managing the media. Agencies who came to our aid, brought with them video teams and media specialists. National groups, in particular, were soon depositing millions of dollars in donations for their work. Although they deserved support for their effort, so did the organization most involved and affected (LA/SPCA). We had not prepared, however, to be front and center with the onslaught of media. Many donors later advised that they assumed the donations would filter down on a local level and that the LA/SPCA must be a subsidiary of the larger organizations. Organizations should plan to:

- Appoint a Chief Public Information Officer (PIO) who must approve all press releases and media planned by all groups working under the lead agency's direction.
- Hire a videographer and photographer to work alongside rescue teams so that work is documented for the media and historical purposes.

Lesson 7: Legislation Helps

Each parish (ie shire) has distinct procedures and separate emergency and animal management roles and responsibilities. Disasters, however, do not adhere to political boundaries. A regional approach is more conducive to effective disaster management and response. Effective legislation provides broad financial support and ensures that key areas are integrated rather than ignored. Political figures would be required to coordinate.

The LA/SPCA worked with state politicians and partner (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) to draft legislation that would include animal agencies in official disaster planning and response efforts. The law was passed and now requires that:

- Animals are included in local and state plans.
- Pets are allowed on public busses during evacuations.
- The public is to be provided with ample information regarding evacuation shelters that permit pets. The state must provide shelters that will house both people and pets.
- Pets and owners evacuated by officials must be tracked in case they are separated during a disaster. A tracking system must be developed that will capture information about pets rescued during a disaster for reunification purposes.
- Businesses that house pets (e.g. veterinarians and boarding facilities), must develop and file an evacuation plan with the state.

In addition to State legislation, the United States government developed The Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act (S. 2548/H.R. 3858), which for the first time in history provides for the following:

- It authorizes the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) authority to assist states and local communities in developing disaster plans.
- It authorizes funding for pet-friendly emergency shelters.
- It allows FEMA to provide financial assistance to individuals with pets and service animals.
- It provides funding for animal related disaster response.

With proper planning, disasters can be managed and the lives of animals and their humans protected. We pay tribute to the thousands who helped us in our time of need and came to our aid in our darkest hours. Thank you.

About the Author

Laura Maloney's career has been devoted to companion and exotic animal issues. As the former Chief Executive Officer of the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, she earned national recognition for managing high-profile dogfighting cases, leading the LA/SPCA through the greatest animal disaster in history when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, and lobbying for the successful passage of major legislative battles.

Prior to joining the LA/SPCA, Laura served as the Assistant Director for the Central Park Zoo, Animal Programs Manager for the Philadelphia Zoo, and Education Curator for the Aquarium of the Americas. Laura has served on the boards of the Louisiana Animal Welfare Commission, PATH (People Protecting Animals and Their Habitats), Gulf Coast Herpetology Society, Coalition for Captive Elephant Well-Being, and the National Companion Animal Advisory Group of the Humane Society of the United States.