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## *Placing the Human-Animal Bond in Context in the Face of Disasters*

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When disaster strikes, saving animals means saving people — human and animal health and welfare are inextricably intertwined. Any disaster plan must therefore include protocols for evacuation and sheltering of both people and their animals.

### **Background**

When disaster strikes — be it a natural disaster or human-created — the very fabric of a community can be torn and, sometimes, irreparably damaged. Disasters may be local or regional events and their effects may be short-term or last many months. Depending on the scale of the disaster, individuals, families, communities and even the entire nation can be affected.

As we've come to appreciate the tremendous emotional, economic and practical challenges that individuals face in the wake of disasters, and as we better understand the role companion animals play in family units, the human-animal bond has emerged as an important consideration in disaster management and recovery.

### **The Bond**

About 25 years ago, the term “human-animal bond” emerged as a way of describing the intense psychological, physical, and emotional dependencies and attachments that exist between people and animals. People who live and work with animals try to capture the bond’s sense in words, but are often at a loss to provide an exact definition for it. The definition accepted by the American Veterinary Medical Association is: “...a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment.” Although this definition purposely does not limit the scope of the human-animal bond to interactions between people and companion animals (pets), “human-animal bond” is most commonly used to refer to these relationships because they represent some of the most common and strongest human-animal attachments. Several factors contribute to the strength of relationships between people and companion animals, including the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of certain behaviors as human-like; the animal’s dependence on its owner; its companion rather

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than utilitarian role; a sense of security afforded by its presence; and its residence in the home, which allows the owner and companion animal to share daily routines.

The key to understanding the human-animal bond is recognizing that it is a mutually beneficial relationship. The responsibility of caring for a companion animal can provide owners with a sense of purpose, an opportunity for exercise, and a perceived need to take better care of themselves. For many people, companion animals are the primary source of emotional and social support because more traditional human support systems have been removed in modern society. People move more frequently, spend more time working, may live alone, may not have children, or may be separated from other family members and close friends by long distances. In addition, researchers have discovered that companion animals provide psychological and physical health benefits for children, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally and physically ill, and the incarcerated.

### **The Bond in the Face of Separation**

When people are separated from their pets (as they often are quite dramatically when disasters occur), the impacts are significant, complicated and challenging. Media coverage of hurricane Katrina in September 2005 was replete with examples of people who refused to be evacuated from affected areas without some assurance that their pets would be saved and cared for as well. All too often, no such assurance could be given. In the ensuing weeks, makeshift shelters were created to care for pets that had been abandoned. Some of these shelters processed thousands of animals. Often there was no clear plan for the return of these animals to their families, nor for their disposition in general.

When people have lost everything — home, belongings, community — pets can be an extremely important source of emotional support. This is particularly true for those without family or a strong human social network. Having something to care for helps people focus on constructive activities, rather than worrying about their own condition. Removal of this last remnant of normality and comfort can be psychologically traumatic.

### **Disaster Planning that Recognizes the Human-Animal Bond**

The AVMA suggests that attention be paid to the following when creating disaster preparedness plans to accommodate both people and animals:

1. Communities must be able to safely secure and maintain companion animals during disasters. Needed resources include suitable shelter (local and remote), quality food and water, access to veterinary care, and personnel who are trained to safely handle animals and who are cognizant of related public health concerns.
2. Efforts should be coordinated with existing animal care and disaster relief teams, such as Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams (VMAT).
3. Information on the human-animal bond and its importance to the well-being of people and animals should be included as a standard component of relief worker

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training. Ideally, disaster relief teams should include licensed social workers who are sensitive to the importance of human-animal relationships.

4. Infrastructure should be created that will permit animals to be traced through the system. Rescue workers should check for existing permanent identification (e.g., a microchip) and, if not present, should ensure that such permanent identification is applied to each animal.
5. Voluntary foster care networks (local and remote) should be established that are capable of providing short- to medium-term housing and care for companion animals that have been or must be separated from their owners, pending opportunities to reunite them with their families. Care in the aftermath of a disaster should include evaluation and testing, as possible and needed, for common species-specific and zoonotic diseases and conditions prior to moving these animals to other locations.

### **Websites and Organizations That May Be of Assistance in Disaster Planning**

American Veterinary Medical Association — [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)

Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams — [www.vmat.org](http://www.vmat.org)

CDC Healthy Pets Healthy People — [www.cdc.gov/healthypets](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets)

FEMA Disaster Planning Tips for Pets, Livestock and Wildlife — [www.fema.gov/library/diztips.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/library/diztips.shtm)

Association of Shelter Veterinarians — [www.sheltervet.org](http://www.sheltervet.org)

American College of Veterinary Behaviorists — [www.veterinarybehaviorists.org](http://www.veterinarybehaviorists.org)

The Center for Food Security and Public Health — [www.cfsph.iastate.edu/brm](http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/brm)

The American Zoo and Aquarium Association — [www.aza.org](http://www.aza.org)

State and local veterinary medical associations, colleges and schools of veterinary medicine, and local animal control offices, humane societies, and public health departments may also be good sources of information, especially when it comes to meeting the unique needs of your particular community.