



S. Peder Cuneo

Shelter for homeless dogs in Belle Chasse, Louisiana.

The Dogs and Cats of Belle Chasse

A Veterinary Perspective on Disaster Preparedness

By Susan McGinley

When the residents of Belle Chasse, Louisiana were evacuated for Hurricane Katrina in September 2005, they were not allowed to bring any animals with them to Red Cross shelters. Thousands of people from the small, rural agricultural community in Plaquemine Parish, about 14 miles south of New Orleans, were dispersed to several other states.

Most of their dogs, cats, and other domestic animals went to a local shelter run by a veterinarian and his wife in an abandoned senior citizen center. The makeshift veterinary hospital held hundreds of dogs and cats; only a few were in cages. The stench, the noise and the chaos were overwhelming.

This is what Arizona Extension veterinarian Peder Cuneo encountered when he arrived in Belle Chasse on September 16, 2005. He had responded to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services email request for health professionals to assist in Hurricane Katrina disaster relief. In addition to his veterinary license, Cuneo had worked as a firefighter during college, and completed the online FEMA Incident Command System program. After applying at a Tucson volunteer center on September 8, he was accepted within days and flew to New Orleans, where the Red Cross assigned him to assist with veterinary needs in Belle Chasse.

"The National Guard had rigged a tarp over the backstop of a basketball hoop in the yard," Cuneo remembers. "The dogs were outside and the cats were inside with a few ducks and a calf. There were hundreds of animals." A no-kill policy was in place, where any animals whose owners couldn't be found, or animals that couldn't be adopted, were sent to Minnesota instead.

A lot of households in Belle Chasse were poor; few of the animals in the shelter had been spayed or neutered and heartworm was prevalent. A high percentage of the dogs were pit bulls and pit bull crosses. The relief team actually had identified about a third of the animals' owners—some dropped their animals off on the way out of town; others who were allowed to return stopped by. Amazingly, a small group of local grade-school children from families who had just returned also served as volunteers, in addition to the veterinarian, his wife, a health care worker and Cuneo. They came daily to walk and water the dogs, and clean up after them.

And in this ravaged area, where nearly every building was heavily damaged or completely destroyed and utility crews were trying to repair downed power lines and clear debris off the roads, people would sometimes arrive out of the blue to help out with veterinary needs.

"Trucks would show up with leashes, dog and cat food, kennels and portable crates," Cuneo remarks. "Someone just drove down from Virginia with all of it." In spite of the help and supplies, there were still a lot of dogfights, he admits. "The really fractious dogs we put in air carrier crates. It was complete chaos inside—a lot of barking."

While he was in Belle Chasse—before Hurricane Rita struck—the shelter still had electricity and tap water the animals could drink, although it had to be boiled for human consumption. In spite of the crammed quarters, Cuneo says the place was still better off than most.

"Other facilities for stranded animals eventually covered several acres, so we were small-scale compared to that." One day the veterinary team went to St. Bernard Parish near New Orleans, where only 100 homes were habitable out of the original 45,000. "That day I saw an animal shelter with a roof but no sides, no electricity or running water, and fans run by generators," Cuneo says. "All the animals were in crates. It made our place look deluxe." The team helped load more animals into crates to be flown to California. Those actually were the lucky ones. Many of the dogs and cats in that parish were dead.

"The streets had a thick layer of mud that was filled with toxic pools of stuff from flooded warehouses," he says. "The animals drank that water."

Cuneo spent four days in Belle Chasse before Hurricane Rita hit and he was later reassigned to another area for two weeks to distribute water, ice, MREs and Pedialyte[®] to people in refugee centers. What he learned firsthand in Louisiana about human and animal evacuation applies to general homeowner precautions during disasters of any kind, including the summer fires that could threaten towns across the Southwest.

"Belle Chasse is located in a more agricultural, rural parish than New Orleans," Cuneo notes. "There was no looting, and there was an effective evacuation system where people who weren't ambulatory were assigned a caregiver. They didn't lose a lot of people in that parish and the town was just starting to open back up." The opposite was true in urban areas, where people who had high blood pressure and diabetes had terrible problems because they ran out of medications. Transportation was difficult because people couldn't get fuel and the traffic was impossible to navigate.

"People least able to take care of themselves got left behind," Cuneo explains. "When you have to evacuate, you need to have supplies to take with you." He now stocks his pantry better at home in Tucson, and suggests that home emergency plans should include preparations for any animals that are living in the household.

"Remember that Red Cross won't let you keep animals in a shelter for people. If you're evacuating in a rural area because of a fire, you must have a carrier for each animal, plus their food and any special needs items such as medications handy." Most counties have a shelter area designated for animals, and the Humane Society and Animal Control may be able to identify animals and link them with their owners if they are separated. People are encouraged to micro-chip their pets.

"What struck me about Belle Chasse was that a lot of people were just pretty determined to take care of themselves," Cuneo says. "The 'yoyo' principle hit me: no matter what, you're much better off assuming 'you're on your own.' If you can take care of yourself and your pets, regardless of whether you stay or go, you're leagues better off than if you wait for someone to help you." ■



S. Peder Cuneo

Calf and dog at Louisiana animal shelter.

Emergency Precautions for Household Pets

Be prepared before disaster strikes. Have ready:

- Transport equipment, including pet crates, cages for pocket pets/reptiles, trailers for horses and other large animals
- Food and some drinking water for your animals, packed and ready to go
- A supply of medications and other special needs, ready to go
- Some type of identification for your animals: implanted microchips are recommended

Red Cross shelters will not accept animals but most counties have disaster plans to provide for temporary animal shelters. Contact your county emergency operations center to find out more about your county plan. For example, Pima County has a disaster response team that works with the county EOC, Pima Animal Control, the Humane Society and the Red Cross to provide for disaster-displaced animals

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