



# QUICK RESPONSE REPORT

## Providing for Pets during Disasters, Part II: Animal Response Volunteers in Gonzales, Louisiana

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*The views expressed in the report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Natural Hazards Center or the University of Colorado.*

### Introduction

This research examines how emergency responders provide for pets following disasters. It follows up on a study I did after Hurricane Charley in 2004. My research on the response to Hurricane Charley involved interviews with those who coordinated the response. The present project involved participant observation in the main sheltering facility for pets rescued from New Orleans. The primary research questions were: Who volunteers to help animals in a disaster, and why? What are the emotional needs of the volunteers (and others) involved in the animal response efforts?

### Methodology

The methodology was participant observation, combined with field conversations with other volunteers in the response. Through networks that I established over six years of volunteer work with the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, I traveled to Gonzales, Louisiana (about 60 miles northwest of New Orleans), with three members of the shelter's staff. We all had experience working in large sheltering facilities. Our role was to help in the overwhelming task of caring for the more than 2,000 dogs, 100 cats, and numerous other animals housed at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center.<sup>1</sup> The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) had leased Lamar-Dixon as the primary staging area for the New Orleans animal response.<sup>2</sup> At that time, Lamar-Dixon was the largest functioning animal shelter in the United States. Over 1,000 volunteers came from all over the country to staff Lamar-Dixon. Volunteers included animal

control officers, veterinarians and veterinary technicians, shelter workers, and "ordinary" people like me. My team arrived at the facility on the morning of Tuesday, September 13, 2005. I worked in the dog shelter area from just after sunrise until nearly sunset, taking notes at night. I left on Sunday, September 18, after being hospitalized with heatstroke. As I explain below, conditions in the field were very difficult.

### The situation for animals—and their people—in New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29. In the flooding that followed, many of the residents forced to evacuate left their pets behind. Many people did so because they were going to motels that would not accept pets. Others, who were rescued in boats, helicopters, and emergency vehicles, report being told by first responders that pets could not come along. Those who were going to emergency shelters had to find alternative arrangements for their animals, as most shelters (such as those provided by the Red Cross) do not allow pets. In many cases, animal shelters will house pets temporarily. This was effective during Hurricane Charley, but Katrina destroyed the New Orleans shelter—the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (LA-SPCA).<sup>3</sup> Some residents who brought their dogs and cats to the Convention Center had to leave them behind when forced to evacuate from there. Several accounts of that evacuation depict National Guardsmen simply letting dogs and cats run free as their owners watched helplessly.<sup>4</sup>

People reported being told that their animals would be rescued later. As Katrina first approached, animal response teams from all over the country were staging near Baton Rouge. However, the flooding, looting, fires, and toxic conditions made entering New Orleans impossible for several days. Moreover, there initially was nowhere to house animals, as the New Orleans shelter was unusable. Once rescue teams could enter, they entered homes, caught animals, and transported the pets to Lamar-Dixon, where they received veterinary examinations and treatment, decontamination baths (if needed), food, and 24-hour care.

## The Setting

Lamar-Dixon holds numerous equestrian and livestock events, and thus has barns with running water and power. It also has a 300-space RV park (all spaces have electrical hookups), as well as restrooms and showers. It was an ideal site for the animal response.

The HSUS leased five barns for sheltering rescued animals. The barns had roofs and open sides, with 5 aisles of 20 stalls each. The 10' x 10' stalls had three walls and wood shavings on the floors. Three of the five barns were full of dogs. They were all in crates; most were wire, but others were the plastic airline-type. The fourth barn housed horses and the fifth was the cat shelter and the veterinary hospital, staffed by the federal Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams.<sup>5</sup> In addition, one of the three dog barns had an entire aisle of aggressive dogs; many had obviously been used for fighting. These dogs could not be kenneled with the general population and required skilled handlers.

My team from Boulder had the task of providing a week of assistance in managing the three barns that housed approximately 2,000 dogs. En route to Louisiana, we developed a plan whereby the three staff members would take charge of one barn with me assisting where needed. We anticipated implementing a system and organizing the entire operation. That first morning was a reality check. Merely cleaning the kennels in *one aisle* of a barn took until noon. By the time I reached half the 120 dogs directly in my care, more dogs had arrived. I had between three and six volunteers working with me to get them fed and watered. Meanwhile, other volunteers washed an endless stream of bowls and crates. The heat and humidity were relentless. Large fans positioned in the stalls moved some air around, but also

raised the noise level. Added to this was the noise of 2,000 dogs barking constantly.

All the dogs received food and water every day, but walks were a luxury available only if we had additional volunteers. Never have I have seen dogs look so tired and stressed. The minimal paperwork taped to the kennels told the location of rescue. The record of one especially sad dog described her rescue from a house where the other two dogs had died, most likely of heat, thirst, and starvation. There were numerous pit bulls, but most of the dogs were mixed breeds, and most had nice dispositions, especially considering what they had endured. All were thin. Many were sick. Many had mange and diarrhea. Few of the male dogs were neutered, and numerous females were in heat. For security reasons, the Lamar-Dixon management insisted that the lights remain on in the barns overnight. Consequently, the animals had no natural day and night. The relentless heat and humidity took a toll on the dogs as well as the volunteers.

Volunteers worked through the night, as vehicles arrived with rescued animals around the clock. The greatest number of animals arrived after dark, once the curfew in New Orleans forced rescue teams to leave the city. Consequently, hundreds of volunteers were needed to receive and care for the animals. My team arrived at the barns at 5:30 in the morning and worked until 8:00 each night, when other volunteers took over. When we arrived on Tuesday, the facility was especially crowded because the state veterinarian would not allow dogs to be transferred to shelters out of the state. After that, dogs who had been unclaimed since the flood could be transferred to shelters in other states, while others had to remain within Louisiana. The transfer process added another level of work, as each dog had to receive various vaccinations to comply with health regulations. The empty kennels after the transfers gave volunteers a moment of false hope. However, moments after a truckload of dogs departed for other shelters, new ones would arrive by the dozens from the streets of New Orleans.

After three days of work, my crew had made progress. We switched all the dogs to wire kennels, which allowed air circulation and were easier to clean than airline crates. We established a chain of command in the barns that systematized the work and gave new volunteers somewhere to turn to learn what to do. We established a check-in area, so that we could make the best use of volunteers' skills and interests. We made simple changes like having

everyone wear nametags, putting volunteers on a first-name basis. We managed to locate some box fans, which we placed throughout the barns, and the air circulation made the dogs more comfortable. Meanwhile, the HSUS had enlisted help from temporary employment agencies in the area. These workers washed thousands of bowls and hundreds of kennels each day.

At the entrance to the kennel area, pet owners could file reports of lost animals. They received nametags listing their first names and the types of animals they were looking for, which gave them permission to enter the barns. Looking for a lost dog could take the better part of a day, and the owners wandered up and down the aisles searching the kennels.

My team was fortunate to have housing in a recreational vehicle, courtesy of another humane society. Most volunteers slept in tents and in cars. We all ate donated snacks and food whenever we could, as stopping for meals was out of the question. There was nowhere in the facility to go to get away from the heat, dirt, and noise.

As the week ended, my team looked forward to transferring our duties to an incoming replacement team from another shelter in another state. Later, in mid-October, Lamar-Dixon closed its operations. Thousands of animals have been transferred to shelters and foster homes throughout the country. *Petfinder.com* continues to reunite cats, dogs, and guardians. I have begun to write my report to the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, which provided me the opportunity to do this unique research. As I put the experience into sociological terms, I want to hold the thought that stayed with me the entire time: *this did not have to happen*. We can do better. People should not have to leave their animals behind. People should not have to choose whether to give the last space on the lifeboat to a child or the dog. I hope that in some way my work can contribute to disaster plans that include *all* members of society.

## Findings and Implications

With respect to the questions of who volunteers and why, I found that the desire to help motivates all kinds of people. However, the people who worked with me in Barn 5 were mostly women between the ages of 25 and 60. They were all white. All had taken time off from full-time jobs, including nursing, administrative work, and teaching. I was the only one who had the luxury of staying in an RV; all

others were camping or sleeping in their cars. They were willing to do anything, including spending the bulk of a day cleaning dog kennels and emptying garbage, simply to help. Everyone I encountered had a “What can I do?” attitude, and no one was above particularly dirty tasks.

The work at Lamar-Dixon was not only physically taxing; it was emotionally draining, as well. The progress we made seemed only a drop in a bucket. The frustration was the worst aspect of the experience for everyone with whom I spoke. We saw no end to the numbers of animals rolling in every day. We never had a sense of being “caught up.” I witnessed only three reunions of dogs and owners in the week there, and each one reduced me to tears—a common sight throughout the facility. The heat and humidity only made a bad situation worse. I succumbed to heat exhaustion and returned home two days before the rest of my team. As I lay in the Red Cross tent awaiting transportation to the hospital, I heard the doctors and nurses discussing the large numbers of volunteers they had seen in the same condition.

The volunteers at Lamar-Dixon simply dropped everything to help. They traveled hundreds and thousands of miles and lived in extremely difficult conditions in order to contribute. They may have known little or nothing about Incident Command Systems, but they were willing to work hard. This type of grassroots response is familiar to disaster researchers. However, emergency responders resist making use of this valuable resource, citing liability issues and lack of appropriate training. For example, in animal response training I have undergone, I heard volunteers referred to as “SUVs,” which can stand for “Spontaneous Untrained Volunteers,” or “Spontaneous Unwanted Volunteers,” and even “Scary Unstable Volunteers.” In any case, there is a cautious attitude about volunteers among emergency responders.

Because Hurricane Katrina was unprecedented in the extent of the destruction it brought, the response called for unprecedented numbers of volunteers. For the most part, Lamar-Dixon’s animals did not call for highly skilled attention. They simply needed food, water, and basic care. Volunteers showed that “ordinary” people could be trusted to provide this and more. Disaster response plans should anticipate large numbers of people wanting to help and should find ways to accommodate their skills, interests, and abilities.

I also noted a need for psychological help, both for volunteers and for pet owners. Volunteers

could have used a place to express their emotions to people who are not also laboring under the same conditions. This need could be met by having psychologists, social workers, and students advanced in such training on site to “help the helpers.” This kind of support would also be valuable for pet owners. In so many instances, owners appreciated simple greetings and questions about the animals they had lost.

## Conclusion

When Hurricane Charley hit southwest Florida in 2004, the stricken Charlotte County had prepared to shelter area pets and informed people about what

to do with their animals. In contrast, Katrina was a bigger storm that hit a major city. The flooding that followed posed a challenge that Charley did not. With the New Orleans animal shelter destroyed and phenomenal numbers of animals in need, the aftermath presented new problems for animal response teams. The primary lesson to be drawn from Katrina’s animal response is that animals are part of the human family. They cannot simply be left behind with promises of rescue sometime in the future. Emergency response plans at all levels *must* incorporate pets to avoid the tragedy of New Orleans.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine’s large animal program cared for the 350 horses also housed at Lamar-Dixon.

<sup>2</sup> The staging area for the Mississippi animal response was located in Hattiesburg.

<sup>3</sup> The LA-SPCA provides care and basic medical services for approximately 11,000 homeless and unwanted animals each year. Before the hurricane struck, the LA-SPCA shelter staff had transferred its animals to other shelters, in accordance with its disaster response plan. The animals housed in its counterpart in Mississippi, the Humane Society of South Mississippi, in Gulfport, were rescued on September 2.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, <http://www.la-spca.org/tails/lily.htm>; [http://www.hsus.org/hsus\\_field/hsus\\_disaster\\_center/recent\\_activities\\_and\\_information/2005\\_disaster\\_response/hurricane\\_katrina/refusing\\_to\\_leave\\_them\\_behind\\_evacuees\\_smuggled\\_their\\_pets\\_out\\_with\\_them.html](http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/hsus_disaster_center/recent_activities_and_information/2005_disaster_response/hurricane_katrina/refusing_to_leave_them_behind_evacuees_smuggled_their_pets_out_with_them.html) (both accessed December, 28, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> Many volunteers, myself included, wondered why there were so few cats compared to the numbers of dogs. We speculated that because cats are more portable than most dogs, more guardians had taken their cats with them. Then again, we also suspected that many cats were simply hiding.



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