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ALTERNATIVES

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Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights

Veterinary Students Making a Difference

Veterinary Resident and Students Aid Hurricane Katrina's Animal Victims

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, veterinary professionals from throughout the United States rallied to provide medical care to the animal victims of this horrible disaster. More than 20 AVAR veterinarians responded to the call for help, leaving behind private practices and shelter jobs to travel to assist with the rescue and treatment of abandoned animals.

Veterinary students and residents also joined the effort, squeezing in time between studies, clinics, and exams to help animal victims. These students were involved in everything from providing veterinary care at temporary shelters to going out on rescue missions to save animals trapped in hurricane-ravaged homes. Below are just a few of their stories.

Shelter Medicine Care

Barbara Jones, D.V.M., had just arrived at the University of California, Davis, to begin her shelter medicine residency when she answered the call for veterinary help sent out by the AVAR on behalf of several animal rescue groups. A 2004 graduate of the Atlantic Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island, Canada, Dr. Jones was eager to put her veterinary skills to use to help cats and dogs rescued in the aftermath of the disaster. Jones also rightly anticipated that the experience would be a fast indoctrination into a high-volume shelter environment.

Dr. Jones spent 10 days, working 14-hour shifts, at the temporary animal shelter set up by the United Animal Nations' Emergency

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Triage at LSU School of Veterinary Medicine

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina swept through the New Orleans area, veterinary students at the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine in nearby Baton Rouge began gathering at the agricultural center on campus to help set up an emergency shelter for animal evacuees. Word had gone out that displaced animals would be sent to the agricultural center while human evacuees were housed elsewhere and help was needed to set up a system for triaging, treating, and housing the animals.

Second-year veterinary student Claudia Channing was among the first to report for this volunteer assignment and said students played a key role in setting up the

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Rescue Missions

Bethany Suchowiecki, a fourth-year veterinary student at The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, spent about a week rescuing Hurricane Katrina animal victims in conjunction with Pasado's Safe Haven, a group out of Seattle. Suchowiecki, whose rescue mission was partially funded by the AVAR, sent the following report near the end of her stay.

"Conditions are bad again because of Hurricane Rita, but rescue missions are still going out. Everyone is so determined, and it shows by what's been accomplished. Pasado's has set up a base camp in Raceland, just outside of New Orleans. Almost 1000 animals have been rescued and we continue to get more.

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Veterinary Students Making a Difference

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Shelter Medicine Care

Animal Rescue Service in Monroe, Louisiana. During this time, she was the sole veterinarian overseeing as many as 130 animals with a variety of injuries, ailments, and illnesses.

Dr. Jones said the task of providing care for these animals was challenging simply because there were so many of them. In addition, nearly every animal was experiencing some type of illness or ailment due to the disaster, and they were experiencing 100-degree weather with no air conditioning relief for the animals or human volunteers.

Most of the animals had diarrhea and many were suffering from heat stress or fever. Dr. Jones also saw a variety of skin conditions, including ringworm, flea allergy dermatitis, atopy, seborrhea, demodex, and pyoderma. One dog arrived with his fur caked in tar. More critical problems included an emaciated German Shepherd who arrived with severe chemical burns on his pads and two other dogs who arrived with late stages of heartworm disease. Local veterinarians stepped in to help treat these more critical cases when supplies and conditions at the temporary shelter didn't suffice.

Dr. Jones said the experience was invaluable, in terms of learning how to set up a shelter clinic, in this case with whatever donated supplies were on hand. It also reinforced the importance of balancing preventive care (e.g., mass deworming and vaccination) with reacting to disease in a shelter (e.g., treating cases of diarrhea as they developed). And it was rewarding – albeit exhausting – to be involved in efforts to help the animal victims, she added.



Dr. Barb Jones exams a dog brought into the temporary animal shelter in Monroe, Louisiana, operated by the United Animal Nations' Emergency Animal Rescue Service. Dr. Jones provided veterinary care for more than 100 animals at the shelter for approximately two weeks.



Triage at LSU School of Veterinary Medicine

organization and logistics of the emergency animal shelter, along with local veterinarians and faculty from the university. Channing said the group designated areas for animal intake, cat and dog housing, an isolation ward, and a triage area for incoming animals who were ill or injured. They also recruited some “computer people” to create a database for tracking the animals and assigned key roles such as volunteer coordinator, supplies coordinator, and a dog and cat coordinator.

Channing said that the animals trickled in during the first few days but word soon got out among evacuees, and they eventually had more than 800 animals, including dogs, cats, horses, birds, reptiles, and other animal companions, at the agricultural center. In addition to helping set up, Channing said veterinary students were put to work doing physical exams, walking and feeding the animals, administering medications, and interacting with the families who came to visit or look for their animals. Fourth-year veterinary students also had the opportunity to rotate through the triage area, helping stabilize injured or ill animals along with volunteer veterinarians. The most serious cases were then transferred to the veterinary school.

Channing said the experience was invaluable, due to the exposure to shelter management and to triage and emergency medicine. She also said it reinforced the importance of the veterinarian's role in interacting with the human companions of animal clients. “It made me realize that a big part of being a veterinarian is understanding how to work with the people,” said Channing, noting that many of those who came to the shelter to visit their animals had lost their homes and were under incredible stress.



A volunteer comforts a dog who was rescued by Pasado's Safe Haven in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Fourth-year veterinary student Bethany Suchowiecki spent about a week rescuing abandoned and stray animals in the New Orleans area.

Rescue Missions

Going out on rescue missions is a unique experience, both horrible and wonderful at the same time. The conditions are horrible: 90-plus degrees, 100 percent humidity, mosquitoes immune to bug spray, brown muck up to our shins. The city is completely destroyed. Houses that were submerged in water are falling apart around us while we search for animals trapped inside. Other houses are still intact. If we need to get animals out of a building, we use sledgehammers and crowbars.

One dog was stuck in a crawl space, so we used the sledgehammer to break the bricks. The dog flew out of the house and into a rescuer's arms, licking his face. Some dogs are so dehydrated we need to give them IV fluids right away. Other dogs look great, as though nothing happened. Those were dogs whose owners had left bags of food and buckets of water for them. We also found many animals who had perished either from dehydration, flood, or disease.

There was a school where many evacuees had left their pets as a last resort while desperately fleeing the city. The owner had left notes on their collars identifying them in case they were found. When we got there, only one dog and one cat were still alive. Seeing what these animals must have gone through makes it hard to stay focused and emotionally intact, but we know that there are others who need us. It's well worth it each time we save one. We found a pair of dogs, one of whom was too sick to stand, and the other dog was bringing the sick one food. We were able to pick up the sick dog, and caught the healthy one simply because he would not leave his friend's side. Now, they're at the sanctuary housed together and doing well.

Once the animals are brought to the sanctuary, we do veterinary exams, treat for parasites, and any other health issues. Then they are housed in crates and cared for by volunteers from all over the country. The veterinarians and veterinary students are there to oversee the care. New arrivals are separated from the others for disease control, and a quarantine area is set up, as well. Residents in the area come and volunteer and welcome us into their homes to stay.

So many people have been supporting us. Even the military, who voluntarily escort us into the city every day, has thanked us for what we're doing. I think a lot of people are horrified by what has happened to the animals during this whole thing, and they are thankful for the groups that are doing something about it."

Jessica Enes and Claudia Channing, both second-year veterinary students at the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine, examine a Hurricane Katrina animal evacuee at the temporary shelter set up on campus. The veterinary students helped set up and run the shelter for several weeks after the disaster, providing care for more than 800 animal evacuees.