

HALTER Project July 25, 2018

Who are the Helpers?

Like it or not, we're already smack in the middle of summer! Depending upon where you live, or are traveling to, that means you might find yourself dealing with fire, flooding, extreme weather, travel, or highway incidents. And, if so, you may need help, or, want to help others.

How to find information about "Animal Emergency & Disaster HELP & HELPERS can be challenging and confusing. How to get help, and who provides it, differs depending on the type of incident and where it happens.

Local, individual EMERGENCIES usually involve the local law enforcement, fire service and possibly animal services agencies. In a DISASTER, one agency will be responsible for coordinating all animal welfare resources. It's really important to understand the distinctions. It's equally important to KNOW BEFORE YOU GO how to get or offer help. (Our "911" info Link?)

The HALTER Project is fortunate to have great teachers and mentors around the USA, in Britain, New Zealand and Australia. They are generous with their time and share experience, advice, documents and other tools.

They are "Subject Matter Experts" in any fields: Emergency Management, Agriculture & Natural Resource Conservation, Technical Rescue, veterinary medicine, volunteer resource development, social media communications, fundraising, and Animal Disaster Welfare & Response.

In an EMERGENCY, any one, or several, of these resources may be involved, usually arriving at the scene individually and often by request of the animal owner.

In a DISASTER, all these resources may be WORKING TOGETHER, under a single command, to provide help with coordination of all resources: evacuations, welfare checks, transportation, shelter management, biosafety, and volunteers.

To help our HALTER Project community better understand ways to help and get help, we've compiled information, some that you may already know, some of it new, in plain language—that may help you understand and decide what roles are the best fit for you, as an individual disaster volunteer, or as part of a group.

Our website is a constantly expanding library, with links to useful information about PERSONAL PREPAREDNESS, TRAINING & EDUCATION, SAFETY ON THE ROAD, and lots more. In this article, we're focusing on VOLUNTEER DISASTER HELPERS.

We receive so many questions, from many places, that it's not possible to be specific. But, the information here will help you to get the info you need for

YOUR neighborhood, county, or region.

Being the best possible helper means being prepared and knowledgeable, and knowing how your region's animal disaster response plan is structured.

Understanding how Emergencies and Disasters are handled, and how to work with the chain of command, is the key to being a valuable, and valued, asset to the community.

For those of you who live in, and/or compete in Sonoma County: We have been working hard since 2014 to improve engagement and communication between Sonoma County Animal Services and people interested in learning how to volunteer for Animal Emergency & Disaster Response roles.

Please keep in mind we cannot report in any official capacity. For answers to questions about the County's Animal Disaster Plan, standards for Animal Disaster Volunteers, Animal Emergency & Disaster Resources, please connect with Sonoma County Animal Services.

To learn about, and train to be, an Animal Disaster Volunteer, (another commonly used term is "Animal Disaster Service Worker"), we've focused on sourcing information and education and training resources that are consistent, and often identical to, those utilized by other jurisdictions with similar geographic and demographic needs. (These may, or may not, be accepted by Sonoma County Animal Services, (SCAS), but they'll darn sure make good, trained, prepared residents who can help themselves and their neighbors. And, of course, by becoming part of a recognized team in a different area, you're able to help THEM if they request it!

We're all aware that "our" 2017 Sonoma County fires triggered several investigations of local response. Findings have been widely published and many people are upset and frustrated. That said, here's our most important takeaway message to the HALTER Project community:

To be the best helper, don't become part of the problem – be part of the solution. By being aware, as prepared and knowledgeable as possible, we can more often keep ourselves, and our animals, out of harm's way, allowing responders to focus on controlling the situation.

We cannot prepare for every possible scenario. We can improve the odds and increase the chances for responders to help us when we need it. And, we want to remind everyone to recognize the huge challenges our agency staff and elected officials face every day.

Many people lost homes and beloved animals and are working tirelessly to move forward and with great positivity.

Who responds to Animals in Disasters?

This info is widely available if you know where to find it, but not all in one place.

Some very helpful mentors have kindly given me “tutorials” and useful links.

I hope that it will help you understand the various layers and types of “helpers” who can safely and legitimately assist animals during different types of incidents.

And— while there will always be Good Samaritans running to the rescue, you’ve got to admit it feels better to be educated, safer, and prepared!!

FEMA has recently released its new “Resource Typing Library”. It includes the first-ever list of Typed Resources for Animal Disasters. (You can find this easily ...just type in “FEMA Resource Typing Library-Animals”).

There is no longer an “umbrella” category for “Animal Disaster Service Worker”. Instead, there is a list of specialist types that can be requested by emergency managers. For example, “Transport & Evacuation Specialist”, “Sheltering” are resources required to train to the same standards throughout the country, in order to be deployed anywhere and operate cooperatively during Federally declared disasters.

In a Federally declared Disaster, States and counties—and DARTs—can be reimbursed for some expenses IF they are compliant with all the training, incident documentation and other requirements.

Not every local group wants to be a deployable asset outside their jurisdiction. Many of these assets are big regional or state teams, organized under the auspices of state agencies, and sometimes, colleges or universities. Some regional teams have agreements with other counties and can be requested to assist (for instance, NVADG can assist in Lake County if requested).

Veterinary Assistance

Veterinary Medical Reserve Corps and Response Teams, (VMRCs and VERTs), are entirely different and function differently, but must also be requested before they can respond. Many DARTs and some CARTs have Veterinarian Volunteers. Restrictions vary, but many vets and techs volunteer privately, with no official reimbursement and no liability coverage, which, sadly, does expose them to risks. Local, state and national professional organizations have established protocols.

Where Do Mounted Posses & Search and Rescue Fit In?

Depends upon the incident and the jurisdiction. They might be deployed as usual to find and rescue people, handle safety, etc., Or, they might be the first typed resource requested to assist with animal Evac, or go help recruit appropriate resources. Depends upon what’s most needed.

What about ATR Teams?

Animal Technical Rescue, (ATR), Teams are another type of resource, not usually activated in the West during fires, but frequently deployed elsewhere in floods, severe storms, and other incidents.

Many individual volunteer ATR team members may also be deployable resources for Evac, Welfare Check, or other types of assistance, if they have the appropriate additional training and ID. In many places, all ATR volunteers are automatically cleared as registered Disaster Service Workers, sworn in and registered with their county, which might be the Ag Commissioner, Sheriff, OES, or other.

ATR Teams are frequently utilized to escort Shelter In Place, (SIP), teams, provide well-being checks, and assist with safety at shelters, etc.. Usually, these volunteers are covered by the insurance provided by a local agency for which they provide assistance, or, they carry their own insurance.

Many CARTs are independent non-profits carrying their own liability insurance. These may have agreements with county agencies to provide assistance, establish their own training programs, and may provide assistance needed in smaller, local incidents. They are usually self-funded as well as self-insured, but members are usually required to undergo security checks.

Registered volunteers and other workers activated during a declared disaster will usually have official ID, and more and more frequently, their info will be available through an inter-agency database verification system.

CARTs operating exclusively under the auspices of a county, state or Federal agency are insured to specific extents by the agency, but ONLY if officially activated.

If you are part of a local North Bay group or NGO with interest in establishing an Animal Disaster Resource Team, you will need to define your goals and have an understanding with your county Animal Services and/or Sheriff Office that defines your group's role and responsibilities, as well as liability. There may be Resources already in place who provide assistance in disasters; i.e., local Humane Society.

In Sonoma County, there are no established CARTs. I agree with the many of you who have expressed confusion and frustration with the lack of, and sometimes contradictory, information being issued by SCAS. We have to remember: They're a small agency working on a LOT of big EVERYDAY issues— and finding homes for hundreds of animals— and very understaffed.

SCAS has stated that it does not intend to establish a CART, however, it does appear to be creating a plan for integrating trained Volunteers into its Disaster Plan. Every county is required to have a plan for Animals in disasters, particularly in a terrorist attack, pandemic, or other mass-casualty incident. This type of response must meet FEMA requirements.

However, in a local incident, Volunteers with specialized training and skills, but with less training in the ICS and/or NIMS, might possibly be requested to provide assistance with specific needs; e.g., trapping, shelter, missing animal data, etc.)

The Sonoma County Horse Council appears to be working to create an Evac & Shelter Volunteer Resource but has not generated any definitive information. The group working on this appears to be “by SCHC invitation only”. Waiting for further details...

Sonoma County Animal Services has issued a volunteer training protocol that is consistent with the new Federal baseline requirements for any volunteer activated in a federal declaration incident.

Agricultural Entry Permits

Some jurisdictions have a process in place that enables bona fide Ag businesses – ranch, farm, grazier, dairy, horse facility, etc. – to get their staff and workers inside an Evac area to protect their property, crops, livestock and animal feed resources.

The business owners assume 100% liability for damage, injury and expenses. Resources escorting workers and owners and equipment in are usually government employees with safety training, who are covered by agency Workers’ Comp.

Who Is Already a Resource?

A number of local and regional groups collaborate with their local jurisdiction emergency managers to provide services that their jurisdiction deems valuable. Most focus on shelter volunteers and animal transportation out of Voluntary Evac areas, mapping and identifying shelter or temporarily boarding locations, hotline call-taker, shelter help, supply donation management, etc..

ALL groups are urged to work with their communities to encourage PREPAREDNESS, rather than evacuation under extreme and dangerous conditions. The goal should be to prepare for relocating pets and livestock BEFORE it becomes necessary to enter Mandatory Evac areas, and, to utilize small reserves of volunteers with additional ICS, safety and Communications training to work with agencies performing welfare checks on animals sheltered in place, help trap and rescue animals, etc..

Community Animal Disaster Response Team requirements vary widely by jurisdiction. To qualify for FEMA reimbursement for expenses incurred during an activation in a Federally-declared Disaster, all volunteer resources will be required to have certification in IC-100, 200 and NIMS 700 & 800.

However, many local CARTs do NOT require all. Not every animal disaster response group wants, or is able to, deploy outside their jurisdiction, or to

enter Mandatory Evac areas. Many groups are not concerned with applying for expense reimbursement, and receive funding from their community, donor/sponsors, and grants.

You CAN be a valuable asset, no matter what you're able to do.

Be clear about your group or individual goals and objectives, and train to meet those needs.

In the North Bay and other coastal and mountain areas of California, fires, floods and slides occur in wooded, dense, rugged populated areas with challenging access.

To safely get into these areas, and get animals out, requires specialized skills and training. We have a responsibility to help first responders –not become part of the problem or worse, another hazard.

Not everyone has time or physical ability, or the financial means. However, there are MANY other roles that are of equally tremendous importance, and levels of training vary. For every Evac team that might be on Standby a couple dozen other volunteer services are needed immediately, and after, the incident ends.

For every animal that is in temporary shelter, stall, kennel, cage and kitty box cleaners are needed every day, all day. Supply depots need managing. Thank you letters need writing!

Time and energy spent on PREPAREDNESS OUTREACH is one of the most valuable services we can provide to our communities.

Hope this is helpful and adds some perspective.

Everyone, stay safe!!