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.
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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