

Taking Care of Your Pets Durin...Hurricanes and Times of Crises

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SPEAKERS

Phillip Stokes, Movie Clip from Homeward Bound, Larry Garcia, Ricky Telg

R Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

P Phillip Stokes 00:33

Welcome to Science by the Slice. I'm Phillip Stokes, Education Coordinator with the PIE Center. Have you ever received a holiday card in the mail from your friends or family that lists everyone in the family, including their pets? Have you ever sent a card where you add your pets' names in the signature? The cultural definition of family in the United States is changing to include our pets. In fact, according to a survey through the American Veterinary Medical Association, the majority of cat and dog owners do consider their pets as family members. When I was growing up as a young child in the 90s I remember watching the movie Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey. I watched it many times we had the VHS. The movie is about three pets, two dogs and one cat, that becomes separated from their family and embarked together on a treacherous journey to find their way back home through the wilderness. There's a scene at the end of the movie where they finally arrive home. The family's in the backyard, the pets emerge from the woods, and to this day is quite a heartwarming scene.

M Movie Clip from Homeward Bound 01:39

Did you hear that? Hear what? It's a dog.

P Phillip Stokes 01:52

First to emerge is a dog named Chance.

M Movie Clip from Homeward Bound 01:54
Here Chance, here Boy. I know that bark. It is him. Jamie! Chance!

P Phillip Stokes 02:08
Then there Sassy the cat.

M Movie Clip from Homeward Bound 02:10
Sassy! Home, home, home home, home. Oh, my Baby. I though I'd never see you again.

P Phillip Stokes 02:22
And last to make it back, which was probably the most moving scene of the film was Shadow, a golden retriever. You didn't know if he would actually make it.

M Movie Clip from Homeward Bound 02:35
Peter. Shadow! Oh Peter, I worried about you so.

P Phillip Stokes 02:47
Just try to watch without tearing up a little bit. And that's what our pets are to us, family. And in today's episode, we're talking about how to address the needs of families with pets when preparing for and responding to a major disaster or emergency. During times of extreme weather events or other disasters, we may prioritize the needs of our immediate family members without taking into account those same considerations for our pets. Here in Florida hurricanes are one of the major natural hazards we face, typically annually, and in our preparation, we secure the necessities for our families, such as food and medications. And we should do the exact same for our pets. Because after all, they are family. In this episode, I speak with Dr. Lawrence Garcia, Clinical Assistant Professor in Shelter Medicine at the University of Florida and Medical Director for the Veterinary Emergency Treatment Service Team. Dr. Garcia and I discuss the importance of having a comprehensive disaster plan that includes provisions for our pets, so when disaster strikes, we are looking out for every member of our family. Well, Dr. Larry Garcia, thank you so much for being a guest on the PIE Center's podcast Science by the Slice to talk about pets and dogs and cats and all of what we need to take into account when we're thinking about disasters. Of course in Florida, we think about hurricanes, but there are other issues that we want to discuss today as well. First, I want to give you a chance to just introduce yourself and tell us who you are.

L Larry Garcia 04:33

Hi, I'm Dr. Larry Garcia, and I'm with the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine. I am the Medical Director for our Veterinary Emergency Treatment Service Team, the VETS Team, and I kind of found my way to disaster through shelter medicine. I'm actually a general practitioner by most of my practice life and then kind of found my way into animal sheltering and a municipal animal shelter was then given some emergency management responsibilities and took some emergency management training. And then as a result of that, in and amongst things, there was an opportunity here at the University of Florida to create a shelter medicine clerkship at the local animal shelter. And so I took that position. And of course, hearing about my disaster background, they recruited me to the team. And so I've been the medical director for about six years now. I've been part of several exercises with counties and various partners of the state. And then I've led two deployments, one following Hurricane Irma to Key West. And another one just recently to Fort Myers following Hurricane Ian.

P Phillip Stokes 05:39

Yes, I do want to say I, I believe you recently received an award for that right a recognition for your work in Hurricane Ian, right.

L Larry Garcia 05:46

Just this past weekend at the Florida Veterinary Medical Association meeting, I received a Gold Star and a Hurricane Heroes Award.

P Phillip Stokes 05:53

Great, well, congratulations. And we know that that is, you know, phenomenal work. And yeah, and I think that kind of leads into just addressing the entire topic of pets and disasters. You know, a couple years back, I talked with Craig Fugate, who's the former FEMA Administrator up in D.C. And one of the things that he mentioned is, and he also worked with the Division of Emergency Management in Florida before that, that during hurricanes and during disasters, he saw time and time again, people would evacuate without their pets. And I think you and I talking here it's a beautiful day outside, we don't think that would necessarily happen. And I don't think pet owners would necessarily think of doing that. But if you don't have a plan, right, if you don't think about your pets, and then all of a sudden something comes up, you're maybe not going to be prepared and you panic, you make decisions that might not be best for the pet. So what is just kind of the general, if you could just set the stage for what happens during disaster events? And how does that impact pets?

L Larry Garcia 06:58

One of the first things to think about is we're all terrible about having a plan. And like any disaster plan, every family should have one. And one of the things we don't think about is on a daily basis, there are explosions and major disasters that would prevent you from communicating with or getting back home to your family. And so the first part of any plan is

any event, we don't have cell phone service or something terrible happens. Let's designate a meeting place. Let's designate a communication point. So if we can get to some sort of access to communication, get that information to a relative who's not in the area, something along those lines. So that's like the first and foremost. And so when we anticipate a disaster, which is you know, even tornadoes, you know, they're coming, there's some sort of prediction of severe weather, things like that. And so as part of that sort of having a plan, a lot of that needs to include, if you have pets, how am I going to move them? What am I going to do with them? Because you're right, what happens at the last minute, there's panic, I have to move my family. And it looks like the shelter I'm going to won't allow pets. Luckily, since Hurricane Katrina, there's the PETS Act, which actually has helped. And so what I would tell you is throughout the state of Florida and a lot of your southeastern states, there are some sort of plan in place for sheltering families with their animals. It used to be where we would have a separate shelter for the animals at the same property where like American Red Cross was tending to the humans. Thanks to COVID, we've actually works more into a co-location type situation, or cohabitation situation where you actually care for your pets in your little space, whatever space they designate for you. That is helping people move animals out. Now, another piece of that is those who do evacuate. Most people would know what their evacuation route is. And kind of their plan is a lot of people have friends family out of state, that may be where they go. So along that route, find the pet friendly hotels. So these are the kinds of things that people really need to be doing and thinking about. And then definitely if you have refrigerated meds, another piece of that puzzle. Nobody ever thinks what if I have you know, have a nice solid little cooler, that I can keep cold and keep those refrigerated meds cold. So there's things like that, that really help and it is really about having a plan. Now for me, I have like double duty because I have to plan for my home and my family and then plan for my team and then plan for the deployment. So like I have to do extra double planning. And then really during hurricane season, I carry a bag in my car. So if at any time I've got to go, I can go. And thankfully my wife is used to that she kind of has a plan. We have a generator. And so there's things like that that we have in place so that she too can be safe and secure while I'm gone. Of course I'm going to try to get things secure before I leave, but this is sort of the thing. And a lot of families don't think about that and like when you travel there should be crates for your pets, there should be food for your pets water for your pets. And people say five to seven days usually takes about five to seven days for some of the infrastructure to get back up where you can get delivery of food and fresh water and things like that, whether it's because of infrastructure, like roads, or flooding or things like that, so you want to be kind of planning ahead. So probably the biggest thing for animals is really, really having a plan for your pets that may involve you or something along those lines. But sadly, we do see this a lot where people leave an animal behind thinking that the animal is going to be okay. And a tree falls through a window or something like that. And now the animal's escaped, and they get injured trying to find the owner again. And so the best bet is to try to plan ahead, go to your county websites, go reach out to hotels and things like that to figure out where the pet friendly places are.

P

Phillip Stokes 10:52

It sounds like there has been some infrastructure development since you said Katrina. Right? Where, and you said it was called the pet act

L

Larry Garcia 11:01

PETS Act. Okay. P-E-T-S stands for it's an acronym. Okay. Basically PETS act.

P

Phillip Stokes 11:07

Okay. Yeah. But that's great. Because it's now it makes it a little bit easier for pet owners to be able to evacuate with their pets. Yeah, it's i i think it's kind of the responsibility of public services and local governments to make those make it a little bit easier, you know, for, for those residents to be able to sustain some of the impacts of a disaster. So that's, that's really great to hear. And so yeah, making that plan ahead of time, knowing where you can go on your path if you do have to evacuate, and having some of those things, just prepared like medications. So what if you were to if you did find yourself in a situation where you had to evacuate, what would be kind of a standard, and you've talked about a couple of those things, but a standard like checklist of things you want to bring with you when thinking about your pets.

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Larry Garcia 11:57

So yeah, extra medications if they're on any medications, and that includes your heartworm and flea preventions flea tick preventions. Any kind of bedding, toys, treats, definitely at least you know, a couple gallons of water, something along those lines to make sure that they can have fresh water, bowls, leashes, basically anything that your pet could possibly need. Because there's the likelihood is you're not going to be in a place that has a yard, the likelihood is you're going to need to walk your pet. And it might even be depending on the situation, if you're having to weather the storm, you might even need some of those, as I call pee pads, those kind of absorptive pads with you in case the pet has to go inside indoors. And then one of the biggest things is medical records. So like whether you have it on a thumb drive or hard copies, something like that, because there's a chance you may get displaced. And another veterinarian might have questions. And so to make sure that everybody's on the same page, having those medical records with you are huge. One of the things that people forget, is yes, the practice that you use may be open, but they likely don't have power, they likely don't have internet, they likely don't have any way to access medical records and get those in a format that somebody else could use. So having those with you is super helpful. So that that way wherever you go, if there's something that needs to be addressed, you can and really like having a list of all the medications your pets are on, because the doctors may have questions about that. And you're like, well, it's just insulin, well, there's several kinds of insulin, there's several kinds of antibiotics. And so those kinds of things are really, really important. And what most veterinary practices will do is as they see an impending storm, if you're going to evacuate, they will stock you up on medications to make sure that your pet is cared for, in the time that you're absent.

P

Phillip Stokes 13:48

Yeah, it really does sound like a lot of things that we would do for ourselves, for our family, with medication with making sure we have our records and identification and that kind of those those crucial items. Yeah, we want to do that for our pets too. And it just makes everything much more easy to kind of weather the storm or whatever the disaster would be. You didn't mention that. Sometimes pets can get out during a storm. So with maybe a tree falling in the

home, but just like there's a lot going on, you leave the door open, whatever, like pets get out. And so that brings in the you know, we want to be able to find them and identify them. So what are some things you can do to prepare for that?

L

Larry Garcia 14:32

So there's there's many options. Microchipping is huge. Some people don't feel comfortable with microchipping and so making sure there's some sort of collar or something like that on the animal. The challenge is with collars is number one, if they're not a safety release type collar, the pet you get injured or caught on something, but at least it would be identification. If it is a safety release type collar obviously you could come I'm off. And so anything that you can do to kind of label the animals, something like they do in some large animals, they actually take a Sharpie and kind of write phone numbers and things like that on them. So there's things like that that would be really important. And what you're going to find is your animal control agencies are going to be responsible for, you know, collecting the animals. And like even, for instance, following Hurricane Ian, there was probably a solid five day search and rescue effort before they could really bring other resources in, because now you bring more resources, you have more people and things that can get in the way of the search and rescue mission. But even in those cases, they have to have a place to have those animals evaluated and secured until the owner can be found. And so a lot of shelters, what they actually do is there's many resources to fly animals out of the area that are adoptable animals that don't have owners. And so a lot of times leading up to the storm, they move animals out, Hurricane Ian was a special case, because they didn't know it was gonna hit there. Tampa shelters were emptied. But nothing in Fort Myers was whereas like in hurricane Irma, all of the South Florida shelters had emptied out, they had several large FedEx planes, the big cargo planes were they loaded up four to 400 animals or so and move them out of state. And then obviously, there's a mechanism for health certificates and things like that, and organizations that are willing to receive those animals. So there's a lot of great things in place that used to not be in place. So there's a lot more out there for the animals, which is great.

P

Phillip Stokes 16:29

Yeah, that is wonderful. Yeah, you know, there's just so much that goes into this, you said, you know, bringing animals out of the state, you know, before a storm, and these are animals that don't have owners, right?

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Larry Garcia 16:41

Correct.

P

Phillip Stokes 16:41

Yeah, I mean, I mean, I'm just thinking of the amount of resources that it takes people, funds, etc, you know, to do that, and it is great that there are people on the ground willing to do that, and, you know, look out for for all of the animals that are that are in need of help during that

time. What about if you're out after a storm, and you find an animal, a stray animal, you don't know if they have an owner or not, and you're trying to figure out how you can get them back home.

L

Larry Garcia 17:10

So there's various ways you can do that. Probably the hardest part of it. One of the things that happened after Hurricane Michael was there was such a loss of communication infrastructure, that even if you found an animal, you even if you had the phone numbers, the cell phones weren't working, landlines weren't working. And so generally, what you want to try to do is document or at least have the information of where you found the pet, kind of what time you found the pet, a picture of the pet, things like that. So if you find an animal, get some pictures, description, things like that. The next step is to reach out to your animal control agency, if you can't reach them, they generally have representatives at the emergency management type center for that county. And luckily, those type facilities are set up to have like phone lines and things like that, and power. And so the big thing now is to get that information ahead of time. So find out your county emergency management office contact information and keep that somewhere where it's accessible. And then when you find that animal, you call them, and then they can get those resources out there to help those animals. Because there again, that could be somebody's pet. One of the challenges that happened after Katrina, that led to the pets Act, is so many people stayed behind because of their pets. And then in the process, the people were rescued. But the animals either had to stay behind or were taken into some sort of animal rescue organization. And then some people were displaced for years out of state. And so eventually, it becomes difficult to reconnect. And so that's why there's been so much more of a movement to really focus on reconnecting people in their pets, so that they don't get separated in that way. And a lot of that has really pushed to sheltering cohabitation and things like that.

P

Phillip Stokes 19:01

Yeah, I mean, I think it's just like, in the back of my mind, you think. I think it's human nature. Oh, that's not going to happen. That's not going to happen to me. It might happen to other people. It might have happened in the past, but it won't happen to me. And hopefully, it won't. And chances are, it probably won't, but you can make sure you, you can make sure it doesn't happen to you by planning in advance. And you mentioned that contacting your county emergency management office and having some of those numbers ready. So like, if you're listening, if people are listening, and they're saying, Okay, I do want to make a plan. I do want to document some phone numbers, what's a good place to start to look?

L

Larry Garcia 19:37

So for starters, I mean, much like a family plan, you want to have your doctors, pets' doctors, all those kinds of things, relatives, things like that. And then basically most of your county websites would have all that information for emergency management. And there are a lot of times especially in Florida, you're gonna have these hurricane pages. It's going to be a lot easier here in Florida because, sadly, we are so prone to disaster. But in other places, you know, there's various things that are coming up around the United States. And these problems are hard to address. And so people that never deal with a tornado may never think about it.

And then all of a sudden, they hit with a tornado. I mean, we lived in Huntsville, Alabama for a few years. And, you know, suddenly, a tornado, a strip of tornadoes comes through, and we now have no power for five days. I'm like, wait, this wasn't even a hurricane. That's not supposed to happen. And so people may think, well, it's never hit my house yet, or, you know, even in those areas that are prone to disaster. Same thing in Florida, there's certain areas, they're like, Oh, we never get hit, it's fine. But it's not. And so really going to the county websites, finding your county emergency management office, and getting that information. And it's not just for people, it's for veterinarians, too, we find that a lot of veterinarians don't even know how to ask for help, because the help starts locally. So if you're in a facility, and you need help, you have to reach out to the county first the county reaches out to the state, the state reaches out to organizations and partners like myself, and then we come down to respond. And that's how it worked in both Irma and Ian the county said, We need help, we need a field hospital. And we're like, we can do that. And so the state says, Hey, go down, create a field hospital in this location, this is what's needed. And so that's how those situations work. So it's really important to have those contexts ask for the help.

P

Phillip Stokes 21:24

Absolutely. Yeah. Knowing knowing because it does vary by county varies by state, by region. And so having that maybe just doing a quick Google search, you know, and making sure that you're, you're knowing where your disaster response organizations are. But yeah, like you said, starting starting simple starting with your, your, your veterinarians, starting with your family members, and kind of working in that direction, as well. Well, Dr. Garcia, is there are there any other topics we didn't cover today, as we've been talking?

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Larry Garcia 21:58

Oh, I would say that's probably the biggest part of all this kind of planning. And a lot of it is you know, having, you know, various, like, you know, forms of communication and kind of keeping up with your family, friends and coworkers. And so your house may be okay. But somebody else may be suffering and having ways as part of your plan to communicate with those that you need to find out about, and those who might need help. And, you know, I've seen a lot of really good formats for that, even, you know, in the many calls that I'm on around disasters, and really looking at how teams work together, I'm actually on the IFAS leadership team calls. And it's really interesting how, like, following Hurricane Ian, they were able to account for every single person by various modes, but they were able to account for everybody and where they were and what they were dealing with. And that's so important. Because like this is the thing is, you know, we kind of are in our little bubble of Oh, my house is destroyed, but there may be people worse off, or they may be people missing that we need to go find. And so you know, the biggest thing is just really kind of having a plan, and then going and working through the proper channels like we don't deploy unless we have a mission request. And that's for multiple reasons for the fact that we need to get reimbursed, but also, so we're not going into an area and leaving it where the state doesn't know where we are. So we get stranded, we have no cell phone communication, they don't know where we are. So they always know where we are every step of the way. And I think that's the other part of it for families is making sure that everybody knows where you are, where you're going what your plan is. So if there's a way they need to get if they need to get in touch with you, they know how to find you.

P

Phillip Stokes 23:41

Yeah, and this accountability of just the resident, the homeowner, the citizen. It is, we are an interconnected network, we all impact each other. And so taking those precautions now helps people like yourself helps those emergency responders because you want to do as much as you can beforehand. So you're not we're not scrambling and doing things in the early aftermath. Yeah. Well, Dr. Garcia, thank you so much. I do want to say that I know that through the Florida EDEN network, the Extension Disaster Education Network, you have recorded a video with a lot of this similar information. But in a different format and a video format, we'll put that in the show notes, we'll put some other links that you might have as well, that would be helpful for making a plan so people can have other formats and, and websites and a checklist, so to speak, to do some of these things. And I just think it's a really important topic and something that sometimes is overlooked. You know, thinking about our pets, we always know that you have to love them, feed them, care for them, give them exercise, but we don't always think of these special circumstances where you have to do a little more, you know.

L

Larry Garcia 24:54

Right no and it's so important and more and more we're trying to get the word out on disaster. This was actually at this Recent Florida Veterinary Medical Association meeting was the first time we had a disaster lecture. And I presented our sort of experiences from Hurricane Ian. So that was great. So we're hoping to keep that moving and get more disaster education out there.

P

Phillip Stokes 25:15

Well, that's wonderful. And I just want to say, it's a pleasure to talk with you today. Dr. Garcia, thank you so much for being with us today.

L

Larry Garcia 25:21

You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

R

Ricky Telg 25:25

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