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Humane Society taking in animals orphaned by hurricane

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by Thomas Fraser
of The Daily Times Staff

The human heartbreak of Hurricane Katrina has been compounded by the plight facing thousands of pets and other animals in the disaster area.

But a lot of those animals will soon be headed north, and opportunities abound for East Tennesseans to help the voiceless victims of the worst natural disaster ever to hit the United States.

The Humane Society of the Tennessee Valley is heading the local animal relief effort, which includes the provision of services for hurricane victims heading north with pets on their own, and preparation for an anticipated influx of stray or abandoned animals from the Gulf Coast.

Vikki Crosetti, head of the HSTV, said volunteers and agency representatives had been at the Red Cross processing center at Central Baptist Church in Knoxville since Saturday, providing evacuees who brought their animals with free pet food, toys and topical flea and tick medications.

"Most of the people we have seen are people who evacuated by car from one of the three states," Crosetti said.

The Humane Society, the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, the Disaster Animal Rescue Team and local veterinarians are providing free vaccinations to evacuees with animals from Louisiana, Mississippi or Alabama. Vaccinations will be offered from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. today, Friday and Saturday at Adopt-A-Pet at 6720 Kingston Pike. Proof of vaccination will enable hurricane victims to take advantage of free lodging provided by area kennels and the Humane Society. Many hotels, Crosetti said, have waived pet restrictions in the wake of the disaster.

Some 225 evacuated animals have received assistance from HSTV so far; eight pets have been "surrendered" to the Humane Society by hurricane victims unable to care for the animals.

Crosetti said strays and animals rescued from the disaster areas won't begin arriving in the area until next week. She said that official animal rescue efforts along the Gulf Coast picked up steam Tuesday, and that she "absolutely" expects dozens of animals to arrive in Knox County. Twenty-nine rescued animals made their way to East Tennessee following rescue from parts of Florida that saw landfalling hurricanes last summer.

"What made it easier with the Florida situation was that animal rescuers were able to get in there immediately," she said. There were no lingering floodwaters or safety issues that prevented prompt rescue of animals left behind.

While Crosetti understands people are eager to help, she reminds people that only Federal Emergency Management Agency-approved rescuers are permitted into the disaster area. She also points out that no donations of pet food are necessary at this time, either on the Gulf Coast or in East Tennessee. That could change, but for now she encourages people to donate cash or adopt an animal to free up shelter space for when evacuated animals do begin to arrive.

She said that animals who do arrive from the disaster areas -- all animals from New Orleans will be taken to Texas -- will not be labeled as such.

"They are all deserving, whether they were already here or came up from the three states."

As for the numbers of animals that will be arriving, she said "no one has even taken a guess."

If space for orphaned or stray animals is limited, help may be available from the Maryville/Alcoa/Blount County Animal Shelter, managed by the Maryville Police Department.

"We've not had anybody ask me or approach me about that, but when something does come up we can cross that bridge. I'm sure we could help out with that," said Maryville Animal Control Officer Eddie King. Indoor space could be made available for about 20 dogs, he said, but noted that cat space is limited.

Crosetti is bracing for a dramatic influx of afflicted animals.

"I've been in this business for 23 years and never imagined something of this magnitude could happen, given the number of animals," she said.

But she finds hope in the fact that people who had lost everything were still eager to care for their pets. She also notes that many pets are taking

the disaster in stoic stride: She describes most of the dogs she has encountered as ``in high spirits."

To get involved:

For more information on how to help the pets affected by Hurricane Katrina, go to www.humanesocietytennessee.com, or call (865)573-9675.



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