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Guest column: As Katrina showed, pets are a key part of disaster planning and recovery

BY ROBIN GANZERT

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast 20 years ago this week. The devastating storm took more than 1,000 lives and inflicted an estimated \$170 billion in economic damage. But often forgotten are the four-legged victims caught in the devastation of the storm. Two decades later, new policies help to ensure pets are folded into disaster response plans, but gaps remain.

At the time, national television coverage of the humanitarian crisis largely centered on the Superdome, which housed thousands of people in the days and weeks following the hurricane. But about 60 miles northwest of that arena, another herculean mission was unfolding. The Lamar-Dixon Expo Center became the headquarters of the largest animal shelter and rescue operation in U.S. history.

American Humane Society was proud to play a critical role. Over the course of six weeks, alongside dozens of other groups, more than 5,000 stranded animals were rescued and evacuated. The helpless creatures were scared and in urgent need of veterinary care. For the rescued animals, dehydration, exhaustion and hunger were an unfortunate daily reality.

In one heartbreaking story chronicled in congressional testimony, a little boy and his dog were separated during an evacuation from New Orleans to Houston. The child reportedly cried out for his best friend until he got sick from distress. In other gut-wrenching tales, animals were trapped in flooding cages or left to dog-paddle for hours in an effort to find dry land.

The epidemic of abandoned pets was a wake-up call for policymakers and animal advocates alike. It was clear that the status quo unnecessarily threatened animal lives and was in critical need of reform. And to their credit, federal lawmakers and President George W. Bush met the moment.

In 2006, bipartisan legislation was passed by Congress and signed into law requiring states seeking federal disaster aid to accommodate pets and service animals in evacuation

plans. That includes providing animal-friendly emergency housing. The law, called the PETS Act, also empowers the Federal Emergency Management Agency to directly rescue, care for and protect animals affected by natural disasters.

Incorporating pets into the nation's disaster response framework represented a landmark moment for animal welfare. Today, it's also credited with saving human lives.

A survey by PetSmart Charities reveals that more than 70% of pet owners would ignore evacuation orders if their furry family member could not come along. And 80% said they would give up their spot at an emergency shelter if pets were not permitted entry. In short, Americans are now more likely to follow safety protocols and evacuate danger zones when their pets are part of the plan.

Building on that legacy, we can do more. Elected officials in Washington could amend federal law to expand options for animal-inclusive housing following natural disasters ranging from floods to tornadoes. One idea could be to offer financial incentives, such as tax credits, to hotels and motels that temporarily accept guests with pets. That way, families and their pets could more easily stay together.

State legislatures could pursue other policies in tandem, as some already are. For example, a new law in Washington state, an area often at the epicenter of wildfires, emphasizes that local governments must incorporate pets when planning for natural disasters. Meanwhile, Florida adopted a new policy this year that makes it a felony to restrain or abandon a pet when an evacuation order is in effect.

Many young Americans today were not alive to experience the horrors of Hurricane Katrina unfolding. But through the stories of heartbreak and tragedy, as well as those of compassion, hope and bravery, we can ensure that the lessons of 2005 continue to inform policy changes that help keep America's pets safe.

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