ANIMAL INTERACTION BEST PRACTICES

Fire and EMS departments may encounter animals in various situations: pet rescue at fire scenes, pets at motor vehicle crashes or at-home medical emergencies, rescuing pets and wildlife in dangerous situations, and the proverbial cat in the tree. They care about all life, both human and animal. The following best practices to give rescuers the best chance for success when dealing with animals at rescue scenes.

Pet Rescue and Resuscitation at Residential Fires

Pets are a part of many homes and are a part of the family. However, there is a difference in the assessment of the risk of saving human lives and the risk of attempting a rescue of a pet. Injured or frightened pets may be found and removed during initial and secondary searches. Fire departments can prepare for pet rescues by:

1. **Implement Specialized Training:** Training should include learning how to approach frightened animals, assessing and treating injuries, and conducting risk assessments before a pet rescue effort. The American Red Cross offers a [Pet First Aid Certification Class](#).

2. **Acquire Relevant Equipment:** Having specially designed oxygen masks for pets is crucial for treating smoke inhalation in animals during fires. Providing apparatus with basic animal medical kits that include supplies like bandages, muzzles, and eye wash is essential.

3. **Collaborate with Local Animal Welfare and Veterinary Professionals:** Fire and EMS leaders are encouraged to contact local resources who may be able to provide education, training, or supplies to responders. Pet care and housing may be needed if the family cannot immediately care for their pet due to losing their home or hospitalization.

It is also important to remember to treat family members with compassion. With the focus on resuscitation, firefighters can forget how traumatic CPR can look to bystanders.

Dealing with Aggressive Pets at Emergency Scenes

When an owner falls ill or is injured at home or in a motor vehicle crash, pets can become protective or aggressive towards rescuers.

1. **Assess the Situation:** Evaluate the threat posed by the pet and determine whether it is safe to approach the patient. Observe the pet's behavior (e.g., growling, barking, lunging) to gauge its aggression.

2. **Ensure Personal Safety:** Prioritize the safety of yourself, your team, and bystanders. Avoid sudden movements or actions that might escalate the pet's aggression.

3. **Request Assistance:** If possible, ask the pet owner or someone familiar with the pet to restrain or remove the animal. If the owner is incapacitated, contact animal control or law enforcement for assistance in safely handling the pet.

4. **Use Barriers:** Use physical barriers, such as furniture, doors, or shields, to create distance between yourself and the pet. Use equipment like blankets or stretchers if the pet approaches aggressively.

5. **Distract or Calm the Pet:** Attempt to calm the pet using a soothing tone of voice. Distract the pet with food, toys, or other items to redirect its attention away from you. Consider sending another rescuer to a window or door in another room to draw the pet to that room and shut the door behind them.

6. **Carry Protective Equipment:** Emergency responders may carry protective gear, such as bite sleeves or gloves, to minimize injury risks. Some teams may have access to animal restraint tools, such as leashes or muzzles.

7. **Avoid Direct Confrontation:** Do not attempt to physically subdue or confront the pet unless necessary, as this can escalate aggression and lead to injury.

8. **Document and Communicate:** Inform dispatch or other responding units about the presence of an aggressive pet so they can prepare accordingly. Document the incident for future reference and follow organizational protocols for reporting.

9. **Training and Preparedness:** Participate in training programs that include handling aggressive animals during emergencies. Familiarize yourself with local resources, such as animal control services, to assist in these scenarios.

10. **Know Legal and Ethical Guidelines:** Be aware of local laws regarding animal handling and ensure actions taken are within legal and ethical boundaries. If the pet poses an immediate danger to life, emergency responders may need to involve law enforcement to neutralize the threat.

By following these practices, you can better manage situations involving aggressive pets while ensuring the safety of all parties involved.

Pet and Wildlife Rescue in Dangerous Situations

Pets and wildlife have gotten into dangerous situations: falling through the ice, stuck in stormwater catch basins or wells (confined spaces), and stuck on roofs and trees. Law enforcement, fire, and EMS are often called to immediately rescue the imperiled animal. However, becoming involved with animal rescue is 1) not a primary duty of emergency responders and 2) can delay response to human life-threatening emergencies. **Under most circumstances, emergency responders should contact animal control officers (ACO) to effectuate the rescue and standby or assist as needed. ACO has the equipment, training, and experience to handle pets and wildlife. Or the ACO can help with fire department operations for dangerous rescues requiring fire department equipment.**

Train officers on how to explain the policy (do not quote policy) and actions that can be taken in preparation for the rescue agency, as a customer service. While not committing to the scene, remain available for fire responses.

It's challenging for responders indoctrinated to help and empathize with the animal in distress to stand by and wait for an ACO response. If the decision is made to start a rescue operation, consider the following in an animal rescue risk assessment:

1. **Assess the Environment**

   ▪ Is the animal in a confined space or a permit-required confined space? Are firefighters or EMT trained and equipped to enter confined spaces? Can the hazard (dangerous atmosphere, engulfment hazard, electrical, etc.) be controlled to allow safe entry?

   ▪ What is the animal's height (tree or roof) or depth (well)?

   ▪ What is the condition of the surface? Is the tree or branch unstable, too thin, or dead? Is the roof structurally sound? How thick is the ice?

2. **Assess the Animal**

   ▪ Is the animal a pet, a feral dog or cat, a farm animal, a prey animal, or a predator?

   ▪ Does the animal appear calm, frightened, or aggressive? A scared or agitated animal may attempt to climb higher or jump, increasing the risk of injury.

   ▪ Observe the apparent health condition of the animal. Sick or injured animals can react differently or aggressively.

3. Identify Risks to Employees

- Select rescuers trained and experienced in working at heights and handling animals. Untrained individuals should not attempt the rescue.

- What is the response time for trained animal professionals (ACO or local veterinarians) to assist firefighters or EMT?

- Assess the risks associated with using ladders, ropes, or aerial lifts. Is the ground a suitable base for rescue equipment?

- Identify potential fall risks for rescuers and implement measures such as harnesses or fall protection systems.

- Is specialized equipment, such as snare poles or bite gloves, immediately available or available in a reasonable time?

- Plan to safely handle the cat to avoid bites, scratches, or other injuries. What supplies (harnesses, soft muzzles, improvised muzzles, blankets, etc.) are available?

4. Establish Contingency Plans

- Consider the possibility that the animal may jump or fall during the rescue attempt. Place soft landing materials (e.g., blankets) under the tree or roof to minimize injury.

- Have a first aid kit and emergency response plan if a rescuer or animal requires medical care.

- Consider the possibility that the animal may run away after being rescued. Have a carrier or containment plan ready.

It's tough for firefighters and EMT NOT to help. It is not what they signed up to do. However, leaders must consider all options to best resolve the situation. Consider what is best for the animal, best for the responders, and best for the residents and community.