

Sunday Column – Disaster Response
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Most of us were glued to news reports of Hurricane Irma and gauging how it might impact our friends and family members. I'm sure everyone in Lee County, Alabama is grateful that the storm subsided considerably by the time it reached us.

Best Friends Animal Society, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Georgia Department of Agriculture have been on alert and preparing to deploy resources in anticipation of the severe damage expected, especially in Florida. We are now getting reports from these storm-ravaged areas and it is pretty dire.

In just a 24-hour period an animal control shelter in Jacksonville Florida moved 400 animals out to destination shelters all over the Eastern U.S. They needed to make room for the large number of incoming strays expected to materialize after the storm. Without taking this measure their existing population would have had to be euthanized to make space.

PAWS Humane was asked to take in ten cats and seven dogs in the wee hours of Saturday morning. They came to us fully vetted and adoption-ready. In fact, we did adopt most of them over the weekend. People have big hearts for animals in distress.

Now we are preparing to take in many more dogs and cats from the poorer counties surrounding Jacksonville. As I write this on Tuesday, we expect 16 dogs to arrive on Thursday afternoon with another 20 - 25 to follow. We have offered to take in up to 30 cats.

These animals will need a lot more from us as poor counties do not have the resources to provide even the most basic standards of care to their stray animal populations. Several states have suspended their usual rules regarding vaccination status in order to facilitate the transport process. We know it is risky but PAWS Humane has the protocols in place to help mitigate this risk. Our mission is to save animal lives and we will do all that we can to help, just as we hope others would help us if we were in a similar situation.

On Friday, before the storm hit, we put out a request for donations of animal care supplies. The response from our community was overwhelming. Many of these supplies were distributed to the Columbus Civic Center for use by families who evacuated with their dogs, cats, birds, and rabbits. We are prepared to truck additional supplies to the Jacksonville area once they have established a location to receive them.

The events of the past several days have been hard on our staff members as they don't know from one day to the next how many animals they will be asked to care for and what their work schedules will look like. They have been trouper through it all and some have gone out of their way to help the evacuees who have settled temporarily in Columbus.

It is a beautiful lesson in human nature to watch a community spontaneously rise up to help others in need.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.