

## **Local CERT Programs Play Major Role in Animal Care and Search-and-Rescue Efforts**

According to the American Pet Products Association, owners spent more than \$55 billion dollars on their pets in 2013<sup>1</sup>. Companion animals are a large part of many Americans' lives, but pet owners' failure to properly plan for pet transport and care during emergencies is still an area of concern. In addition, many pet owners refuse to evacuate without their pets during an emergency, which can cause additional delays, distress, and logistical concerns.

Shelters and warming centers often have blankets and hot beverages for their human residents, but many are not prepared to cope with pets. In the winter of 2013-2014, the Shiawassee County, Michigan CERT team, together with the local Humane Society, worked to ensure that everyone at the shelter (both humans and animals) had access to necessary supplies. Having CERT volunteers on site who were trained in volunteer management enabled Humane Society volunteers to focus on the animals. In addition, CERT volunteers were able to help transport pets and families to the shelter. TJ Clark of the Shiawassee County Emergency Management noted that the CERT's role is more than making sure the shelters are prepared for pets, it's about getting the whole community back on its feet, functioning as safely and as quickly as possible.

Other CERT programs have also realized the increasing importance of incorporating pets into emergency planning in their communities. The Spartanburg County, South Carolina CERT works with shelters to help make them pet-friendly through an initiative called the Disaster Animal Response Team (DART). The DART training curriculum is currently being developed in part through the expertise of a local veterinarian. DART provides emergency shelters with access to kennels of all sizes, leashes, collars, bowls, water, food, and toys. Bob Grudzien, a volunteer with the Spartanburg County CERT, described the expansion of the DART program, "We're working with local farmers so that if we have some large areas or barns that [have] to be evacuated [then we could house animals like horses]." Robbie Swofford, Spartanburg CERT coordinator explained, "Any time you have a disaster, it's just as stressful on the animal who is in an unfamiliar area with unfamiliar people."

The Spartanburg County CERT also has a longstanding relationship with the South Carolina Search and Rescue Dog Association (SCSRDA), and together the groups conduct trainings and collaborate on searches. CERT volunteers also often serve as flankers when working together with SCSRDA: "While the dog-watcher is focused on whether the dog is alerting for scents, we keep them and ourselves safe as they cross roads... We use GPS and compasses to know where we are and mark any clues on GPS and radio them in," said Grudzien.

The responders and emergency management personnel at the search's base camp can analyze the GPS information and any photos. Because flankers are able to guide volunteers and the search dogs in a precise grid pattern, they can frequently significantly narrow down a radius for a search operation, as was the case with an activation in nearby Laurens County. Despite wind and terrain creating challenges for the dogs, Swofford described how the CERT was able to assist: "There were three dogs that hit on a scent on Saturday, and by the end of the day, we were able to give the person in charge a [small radius in which] to look for the individual."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press\\_industrytrends.asp](http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp).

For more information on the Shiawassee County CERT, contact TJ Clark at [tclark@Shiawassee.net](mailto:tclark@Shiawassee.net), and for more information about the Spartanburg County CERT, contact Robbie Swofford at [rswofford@spartanburgcounty.org](mailto:rswofford@spartanburgcounty.org).