Saving dogs, cats – and alligators? Pets and livestock all part of disaster management

Bill Gentry knew he’d be helping rescue dogs, cats, horses, and some cattle as the coordinator for volunteer animal rescue in Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina. He also wound up helping rescue donkeys, rabbits, iguanas, chickens, geese and ducks as well. But alligators?

“He’s not sure where the two alligators came from,” said Gentry, a veteran of numerous disaster management relief efforts and the director of the community preparedness and disaster management program in the department of health policy and administration at UNC’s School of Public Health, “but we’re pretty sure they weren’t pets.”

Gentry led a 12-person team from North Carolina in coordinating the delivery of supplies, medicine and veterinary care to Mississippi animal shelters and clinics impacted by the storm. The team also managed delivery of the donated goods that arrived from around the country, including dog and cat food, bales of hay and even fencing.

“People have been overwhelmingly generous,” said Gentry, a former state emergency management official. “We had pallets upon pallets of donated supplies.”

Gentry and his team were called to Mississippi as part of a cooperative effort among states to assist each other with disaster relief. Called SART (State Animal Response Team), the group consists of animal experts, including veterinarians, and typically provides relief for 10 to 14 days. North Carolina has been a national leader in animal rescue disaster management, thanks in large part to Gentry’s training programs. But it’s never easy.

“We were fortunate that volunteers from other neighboring states came in before us and helped out,” said Gentry. “But there was still plenty of work for us to do.”

Gentry said the biggest challenge was exhaustion. Many of the animal rescue volunteers worked non-stop. Nearly 1,000 animals were rescued and placed in temporary shelters, where they stayed until they were recovered by owners or placed for adoption. The SART team also helped veterinary clinics impacted by the storm reestablish their practices.

“So the clinics were completely devastated,” Gentry explained, “so a temporary facility had to be set up for them. In other cases, the structure itself wasn’t damaged, but the practice was disrupted because customers had fled before the storm. The aftereffects of the storm are just enormous.”

Inoculator projects help counties share ideas, resources to improve public health

The “Touch No Tobacco” (TNT) initiative was a cooperative effort undertaken by North Carolina health departments working in conjunction with the UNC School of Public Health’s North Carolina Institute for Public Health — the service and outreach arm of the School, and the North Carolina Division of Public Health. The TNT project, which is funded by the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund, is one of several “incubator” projects coordinated by the Institute.

The two-year-old incubator initiative, funded this year with $1 million in recurring funds from the North Carolina General Assembly, develops voluntary partnerships among local health departments and public health stakeholders to establish and enhance essential public health services, particularly for under-resourced counties.

“The incubator projects provide an extremely effective way for counties to share ideas and help each other find resources for programs like Touch No Tobacco,” said Leah Devlin, N.C. State Health Director. “The result is that, working together, we can do more to protect and improve public health in our state.”

Last year, the incubator initiative provided grant-writing resources for county health department workers in 11 North Carolina counties that allowed them to successfully pursue funding from the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund to develop tobacco use prevention and cessation projects in their schools.

The counties used these funds to launch the “TNT” initiative among high schools (19) and middle schools (26) in their counties. Youth involved in the TNT projects in Currituck, Dare, North Hampton, and Warren counties convinced their county school boards, through lively presentations, to adopt tobacco-free policies on school campuses. The other counties participating in the TNT project are Beaufort, Bertie, Camden, Edgecombe, Hyde, Martin, and Pasquotank.

“This is an example of counties coming together as an incubator and leveraging state funds to secure additional funds,” said John Graham, the project’s coordinator and the deputy director of the Institute, which manages the funds for the TNT project and will later coordinate an evaluation of individual incubator projects as well as an evaluation of the overall initiative.

“The incubator initiative is an innovative approach that brings underserved counties together to pool resources and strengthen existing services or introduce new essential services.”

The incubator initiative unites counties so they can share ideas and resources and also collectively apply for grants.

“As a group, they have more resources to develop grant proposals and they are also more attractive to funding agencies,” Graham says.

Presently, five incubator groups ranging in size from eight to 19 counties are participating in the initiative. Sixty-five of the state’s 100 counties have joined incubators, including nearly all of the poorest counties.

“The incubator projects represent an exceptional opportunity to strengthen public health across-county collaboration,” Baker adds. “There is nothing like it anywhere else in the country.”

Over the last year, several incubator projects have addressed aspects of North Carolina’s public health accreditation initiative to assure that health departments have the capacity to provide consistent essential services. Others have surveyed and evaluated billing and information system policy and procedures and are now introducing best practices across member agencies. A standard approach to community assessment, a new employee orientation, and a CD-based board of health orientation — all developed by the incubators — are presently being piloted and later will be made available to incubator members and to North Carolina’s health departments more generally.

“We believe the incubator slogan “Better Together” is born out in the results of incubator activities over the last year,” Graham notes. “We expect these collaborative efforts to grow stronger in the coming year.”

For more information on the North Carolina Institute for Public Health, visit their Web site at www.sph.unc.edu/nciph.

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- By Gene Funder
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Incubator projects help counties share ideas, resources to improve public health

Tobacco is banned on school campuses in four North Carolina counties, thanks to programs started by local health departments who shared their ideas and pooled their resources to develop an anti-smoking campaign for youth in their areas.

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Gentry said it’s personally satisfying to assist in the animal rescue side of disaster management, in part, because of the immediate impact.

“It’s very rewarding to see people reunited with their animals,” said Gentry. “There’s an immediate return on the work that you’re doing that is often unique in disaster situations.”

The work can also get personal in ways a veteran disaster management professional doesn’t anticipate. During Hurricane Dennis, Gentry befriended a 2-year-old Dalmatian and later brought it home for adoption.

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