

What about Fluffy? Pet fostering in Cairns, Queensland

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The perennial problem of how to effectively coordinate pets and their owners during evacuation is one that Cairns Regional Council in far north Queensland is looking to solve.

Cairns region has 20,000 registered dogs and numbers of cats are estimated in the thousands. In a location known for its significant hazard exposure of cyclones and storm surges, pet ownership means including holistic planning for pets during emergencies and disasters.

Planning can be troublesome for pet owners living in storm-surge areas when their pets cannot be brought into lock-down cyclone shelters, or for people with specific vulnerabilities who may need evacuation in a disaster. Cairns region disaster managers face the same dilemma, particularly because the RSPCA and other animal management facilities are in storm-surge or flood zones. There are multiple examples worldwide of residents refusing to evacuate without their pets or being traumatised through evacuation separation. Thus, the Cairns Regional Council disaster team worked with a new community-based animal care group to assist.

The group, Animal Care for Seniors at Home (ACSAH), was formed to support older people to keep their pets at home. Owners often find they are no longer able to walk dogs (or walk them enough), provide specific care or they need advice about medication. ACSAH assists with these services by matching volunteer carers with pet-owning clients. Pets include dogs of all breeds, ages, sizes and temperaments although cats and others have been included.

The council became involved by providing advice on different emergency scenarios and support for the group's establishment. A trust relationship has developed with regular council officer participation at meetings and activities to share information.

One aspect was what happens during evacuations. As ACSAH can offer short-term pet fostering for people who may be unwell or need to go away, its capacity to coordinate emergency fostering during times of evacuations was raised. ACSAH volunteers living outside hazard zones offer to care for pets of owners who need to be evacuated. The local disaster management team facilitates the arrangement and provides support as necessary through established response management processes.

To assist with effective planning, ACSAH provides its team with a 'client' list by hazard zone each month during the summer wet season. Volunteers work with clients to develop a personalised household emergency plan that includes the pets. The disaster management team checks the client list for any correlation with its Evacuation and Recovery ('Vulnerable Persons') Register so that priority contact is made with ACSAH clients in hazard zones at the same time as those on the register in the event of an evacuation.

ACSAH and the council's disaster resilience officer meet regularly at community activities. ACSAH members are kept informed about possible weather or other significant events through inclusion in a regional 'early advice' email group.

While the theory and practice are relatively simple, the relationships between the council, ACSAH and its community is one that needs nurturing to flourish. However, this is an excellent example of shared responsibility and recognises the value of the role of ACSAH in Cairns communities as well as its unique place in local disaster management.