

Oklahoma Town Saves Dogs and Cats, Gets Reward

Floods required an animal welfare nonprofit to stretch beyond its means to save dogs and cats.

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The city of Miami, Okla., has room for just 16 animals at its municipal shelter, a location that's overcrowded and overflowing with animals during the best of weather, officials say. But when news hit that a flood was on its way, volunteers at the nonprofit Animal Welfare Society knew they needed help.

When flood waters ravaged the small Oklahoma town in July 2007, hundreds evacuated the city. The disaster was exposing stray animals to toxic water, while residents leaving low-lying areas needed a place to keep their pets because many couldn't bring their cats and dogs with them.

The nonprofit enlisted the assistance of the American Humane Association (AHA), an organization that provides disaster relief for animals. The AHA responded immediately – and made plans to assist in the future.

"We were aware we were going to be in deeper than we could handle," says Jean Eslick, president of the Animal Welfare Society. "We needed help. We were very glad they were here, they taught us everything we needed to know and gave us wonderful support."

The collaboration led to a temporary animal shelter at a covered horse arena, where approximately 200 to 300 animals were housed during floods. The AHA brought veterinary supplies, food and kennels to assist. After the flood waters receded, pets were returned to their owners and almost all strays were adopted. Only a few cats remain, but they are living comfortably with foster families, Eslick says.

When AHA officials left Miami, they decided the city needed a bit more help, and plans were underway to provide it – without the knowledge of the Animal Welfare Society.

"There was obvious need for financial assistance," says Debrah Schnackenberg, interim vice president of Animal Protection Services for the AHA. "After spending just 12 days there, we saw clear passion and commitment from the board and volunteers but the money just wasn't there."

The AHA surprised the nonprofit with a \$5,000 grant on Aug. 13, 2007 to aid in recovery efforts. "A big part of our deployments are about recovery," Schnackenberg explains. "The money will help in that process in Miami."

The gift is the first-ever animal emergency services grant the AHA has awarded.

"I'm so amazed they did that for us, we never expected anything like that," Eslick says. "We are most grateful. They came, they taught us and they left us feeling confident. We'll be grateful forever, not only for their help, but also for their friendship."