

Humane Society, Red Cross Team Up for Dog Owners

In the wake of San Diego's devastating fires, two organizations join forces to assist dog owners in the area.

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Photos courtesy of the San Diego Humane Society. As wildfires swept through San Diego County last week, Marlo, a shepherd mix battling bone cancer, and his owner, found refuge at a nearby Red Cross shelter.

And they weren't the only ones. So did thousands of animals and owners, thanks in part to the San Diego Humane Society.

After Hurricane Katrina, the organization established a relationship with the local Red Cross chapter to keep pets and families together during disasters, said spokesperson Simran Noon.

Previously the national disaster relief agency did not permit pets.

In San Diego County, where some of the worst damage has occurred, the Red Cross opened 14 evacuation shelters. Of those, nine allow pets.

Since the deadly fire storms began last Sunday almost 6,000 people, many with pets in tow, arrived at Red Cross facilities, a spokesman for the disaster relief agency said.

A few evacuation shelters have made an exception to house animals indoors, in separate rooms. Pets aren't allowed inside most facilities because of health and sanitation concerns. Instead, crated animals are kept outdoors, and taken care of by their owners.

An open line of communication with Red Cross has allowed the humane society's staff to deliver needed supplies to evacuation shelters, such as food, crates, leashes, and blankets. Noon said the regular deliveries were made possible by an outpouring of support from the community and local businesses.

Red Cross spokeswoman Gayle Lynn Falkenthal said dog owners seemed to adjust to their new living arrangements, turning outdoor grassy areas at several of the shelters into ad hoc dog parks.

In fact, evacuees at Mira Mesa High School, the largest of the pet friendly shelters, unofficially gave the doggie play area a name: "puppy hill."

"It's a comfort for a lot of people to have their pets with them," said Falkenthal.

The humane society's air conditioned M.U.T.T vehicle (Mobile Unit Transport and Treatment) was also stationed at Mira Mesa, making dogs like Marlo, who's battling bone cancer, as comfortable as possible with housing inside the climate-controlled vehicle during their temporary stay.

A humane society veterinarian provided healthcare to all ailing animals, while healthy animals were placed in crates, underneath a tent, and outside the evacuation center.

Noon says the good news is most people took their dogs with them before fleeing.

But other animals, like horses and livestock, were not so lucky.

The humane society has received thousands of phone calls from worried livestock and pet owners - 500 on Friday alone -- requesting someone check on their animals left behind.



Of all the calls Noon says only about a dozen involved dogs.

The humane society's highly trained Animal Rescue Reserve (ARR) helps evacuate the animals and conduct welfare checks, where they provide food and water to animals whose owners are not able to get back into their homes.

Firefighters said Sunday they're gaining control over the flames but it may take another week before two of the county's largest fires – called Witch and Harris – are fully extinguished.

For more information about how the California fires have affected dog owners in the area, [click here](#).