

Disaster Preparedness for Pets

The key to survival during a disaster, crisis or emergency is to be as prepared as possible before the storm hits. Take the time to make a plan and assemble an emergency kit for you and your pet. By taking these steps now, you will greatly increase your pet's chances of survival.

Before the disaster

Everyone in your family should know what to take in the event of an emergency. The easiest thing you can do for yourself or your family is prepare an "emergency pet kit" that is already packed with everything you'll need for your pet in the event of an evacuation. Here are some items you should keep in your "emergency pet kit":

- Food and water for each pet for at least three to five (3-5) days. Don't forget bowls.
- Medications and medical records stored in a waterproof container (such as a Ziplock® bag). A small pet first-aid kit is also a good idea and can be equipped with many of the same medications that people use (antiseptic wipes, Neosporin®, bandages). Always consult your veterinarian about what would be best for your pets.
- Litter and a box for your cats and waste collection bags for your dogs. Don't forget the scoop!
- Leashes, collars, harnesses and carriers to transport pets safely and ensure that they can't escape. Carriers should be large enough for your pet to stand comfortably, turn around and lie down. Don't forget to include blankets or towels for bedding or warmth.
- Include current photos and descriptions of your pets to help others identify them in case you and your pets become separated. Create a "personal pet page" that includes a photo, physical description, medical history, etc.
- Bring information about your pets' feeding schedule, medical conditions, behavior issues and the name and number of your veterinarian in case you have to board your pets or place them in foster care.

Find a safe place ahead of time

Don't wait until the disaster strikes to do research about where to go. Plan ahead. Because evacuation shelters generally DO NOT accept pets (except for service animals), you must plan ahead to make certain your family and pets will have a safe place to stay.

Local shelters should always be a last resort for your family and pets. If you have other family, friends or a hotel to go to out of the area, it would be preferable to living in an emergency shelter. The decision to open local shelters will depend on the severity of the event as well as local needs. Information about local shelters is available via telephone by dialing 3-1-1.

In Alachua County, there are no “pet-friendly” shelters. All pets taken to a shelter will be transferred to Alachua County Animal Services (ACAS) and will be housed at the county shelter for the duration of the emergency event and reunited with families after the fact.

Instead of relying on the county shelter to care for your pets during an emergency, try to contact hotels and motels outside your immediate area to check policies on accepting pets. Remember to ask about size, number, species and breed restrictions (some may allow dogs but not cats; or some may allow little dogs but not big dogs). Call ahead for a reservation as soon as you think you *might* have to leave your home. Don't wait for mandatory evacuations! Chances are the hotels and motels will already be booked.

In Case You're Not Home

An evacuation order may come while you are away from home or at work. Make arrangements, in advance, with one of your neighbors or a friend to take your pets and your emergency pet kit to meet you at a specified location. Make sure this person is comfortable with your pets and your pets are comfortable with them. And of course, make sure this person knows where to look for your pets and emergency supplies.

Don't Forget Identification

Your pet should be wearing up-to-date identification tags at all times. Alachua County dog tags are lightweight metal tags that easily attach to your pet's collar and the registration number of the tag is directly linked to your name and address (if it's current). You may also want to purchase a more personalized identification tag that might include your pet's name and your cell phone number, that way anyone that finds your pet can reach you whether you're home or not (or at any point during an emergency event). For a little extra insurance, have your pet microchipped. ACAS can microchip your pet for only \$15.

When You Evacuate, Take Your Pets with You

The single most important thing you can do to protect your pets is to take them with you when you evacuate. Animals left behind in a disaster can easily be injured, lost or killed. Animals left inside your home can escape through storm-damaged areas, such as broken windows. Animals turned loose to fend for themselves are likely to become victims of exposure, starvation, predators, contaminated food or water, or accidents. Leaving dogs tied or chained outside in a disaster is a death sentence.

- If you leave, even if you think you may only be gone for a few hours, take your animals. When you leave, you have no way of knowing how long you'll be kept out of the area, and you may not be able to go back for your pets.

- Leave early—don't wait for a mandatory evacuation order. An unnecessary trip is far better than waiting too long to leave safely with your pets. If you wait to be evacuated by emergency officials, you may be told to leave your pets behind.

If You Don't Evacuate, Shelter in Place

If your family and pets must wait out a storm or other disaster at home, identify a safe area of your home where you can all stay together. Be sure to close your windows and doors, stay inside, and follow the instructions from your local emergency management office.

- Bring your pets indoors as soon as local authorities say there is an imminent problem.
- Keep pets under your direct control; if you have to evacuate, you will not have to spend time trying to find them.
- Keep dogs on leashes and cats in carriers, and make sure they are wearing identification.
- If you have a room you can designate as a "safe room," put your emergency supplies in that room in advance, including your pet's crate and supplies.
- Have any medications and a supply of pet food and water inside watertight containers, along with your other emergency supplies.
- If there is an open fireplace, vent, pet door, or similar opening in the house, close it off with plastic sheeting and strong tape.
- Listen to the radio periodically, and don't come out until you know it's safe.

Be patient with your pets after a disaster. Try to get them back into their normal routines as soon as possible, and be ready for behavioral problems that may result from the stress of the situation. If behavioral problems persist, or if your pet seems to be having any health problems, talk to your veterinarian. For more information about disaster preparedness for pets, please contact the Alachua County Animal Shelter at 352-264-6870.