Is your family prepared for a major emergency, evacuation or natural disaster? How about your pets? Making arrangements before the chaos of an emergency can increase your pet’s chances of survival and greatly reduce the fear and anxiety your pet will experience.

In Ontario, we are each responsible for our own safety and survival during the first 72 hours of an emergency. Responsibility for the safety and survival of pets ultimately rests with pet owners throughout the entire duration of an emergency. Police officers, fire fighters and paramedics are generally not trained to assist pets in an emergency. This is not to say that they will not help animals in distress, however they may simply not have the time or resources to assist pets due to other priorities.

Here are some practical tips about how to best prepare for the safety of your pets during emergency situations.

Develop a family emergency response plan
This includes setting a primary and alternate meeting point away from the home in case of evacuation, listing emergency telephone numbers where all family members can easily find them (including the name and number of your pet’s veterinarian) and putting together a family emergency survival kit.

Test the plan regularly (two-three times per year ideally) with all family members - including pets - involved. For example, prepare your cat for a potential evacuation by putting him in a carrying cage in a quick and calm manner. Simulate a real emergency environment and conduct your drill at night to allow pets to become accustomed to the chaos, uncertainty and disruption that will accompany an emergency situation.

Create a pet emergency survival kit

Keep your pet’s kit with your family’s emergency survival kit for quick and easy access (preferably on the top shelf of a closet near your front door; away from the reach of small children). Some things to include are:

- 72 hour supply of food, bowls, and can opener
- 72 hour supply of bottled water
- Blankets/towels (more than one in case they get soiled)
- Small toy
- Leash, muzzle, harness
- Litter pan, litter, plastic bags and scooper
- Pet carrier for transportation
- Medical records, especially proof of vaccinations
  (most boarding facilities will not accept pets without proof of current vaccination records).
- Medications and pet first aid kit
- Current photo of your pet in case he gets lost
- Information on your pet’s feeding schedule,
  behavioural/medical concerns, and special instructions in case you have to board your pet
- List of boarding facilities in your area, hotels/
  motels that accept pets and friends and relatives
that you and your pet can stay with (pets are generally not allowed inside emergency shelters designated for people, with the exception of service animals such as guide dogs).

- ID tag (microchipping is also recommended)
- Flashlight
- Check the kit twice a year (an easy way to remember is to do it when you check your smoke alarms bi-annually) to ensure freshness of food, water, and medication, and to restock any supplies you may have “borrowed” from it.

Other considerations

- Always bring your pet indoors at the first indication of an emergency.
- If you must evacuate your home, take your pet with you if it is safe to do so. This greatly increases your pet’s chances of surviving the emergency.
- Place a Rescue Alert Sticker by your front door in case you have to leave your pets behind. The stickers can be obtained from your local humane society or animal shelter and are placed on your front door to alert police, fire fighters, and paramedics to the type and number of pets in your home.
- Designate a back-up caregiver for your pet in advance in case you are away from home when emergency strikes. Some things to keep in mind:
  - Choose someone who lives close to your residence, someone who is usually at home while you are at work, and someone who has access to your home;
  - Familiarize your pet and caregiver with each other;
  - Ensure that your pet’s caregiver knows the location and contents of your pet’s emergency survival kit, and any special instructions for looking after your pet;
  - Provide your pet’s caregiver with the name, phone number and location of your pet’s veterinarian;

Establish a primary and alternate designated meeting spot in order to reunite with your caregiver and pet.

Returning home with your pet

When returning to your home with your pet after an emergency, there are some important considerations.

- Do not let your pet go outside unattended, as there could be post-emergency dangers such as downed hydro lines, hazardous material spills or contaminated food and water. If possible, leave your pet with a friend or boarding facility and conduct a safety check of your home and surrounding property and clean up any dangers prior to bringing your pet home.
- Monitor your pet’s behaviour after an emergency for any signs of emotional disturbance - including lack of appetite, lethargy or being easily frightened. If you are unsure if your pet has experienced emotional or physical trauma, take him to a veterinarian for proper diagnosis and care.

Remember, you are ultimately responsible for the well being of your pet in an emergency. You now have the tools and resources to assist you in meeting this responsibility. Your pet will thank you for it and one day just might save your life in return!

Charlene Schafer’s background is in the field of emergency management and policing. She worked for Emergency Management Ontario in a variety of roles and is currently working for the Policing Services Division of the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, where she is responsible for the policing component of the animal welfare portfolio. Charlene prepared this article as a personal initiative based on her experience in the field of emergency management and her love for animals.

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