

In times of crisis, disaster therapy dogs can provide needed comfort



Pat Seybold and her certified therapy dog Lionel last year became certified in Animal Assisted Crisis Response. Cindy Ehlers of Oregon developed Animal Assisted Crisis Response in 1998 after responding with her dog, Bear, to the Thurston High School shooting in Springfield, Ore. She realized people in crisis and natural disaster situations could benefit from animal-assisted therapy and knew dogs and owners needed special training to respond effectively.

The four-day intensive training in Kansas City, Kan., included both classroom and simulation exercises. The simulations included a visit to the Kansas City International Airport where Pat and Lionel along with 13 other team members rode the escalator, were frisked by security and boarded an airplane. The dog teams also visited Olathe Fire Station No. 6 where fire fighters dressed in their fire equipment, blared sirens, shrieked air brakes, rolled out hoses and flashed lights. The final exercise was a 'shelter' simulation in the aftermath of a tornado.



All of these exercises were intended to provide real-life simulations as the sights, noises, smells and confusion are not what most of these teams are used to and can be overwhelming and intimidating. These exercises provided an opportunity to evaluate how well both dog and handler responded to each situation and to give each team an opportunity to determine if this type of response was something they would wish to continue.

The animal-assisted therapy teams role is to listen, comfort, assess and to bridge an emotional gap between the victims and the responders. After a dog calms a victim, the dog's owner can then listen to the victim and help determine if other responders doctors, nurses, emergency medical technicians and mental health professionals can assist them. Often, victims will shut down emotionally, stop thinking clearly, or lash out in the midst of crisis or disaster. A dog's presence, and even more so petting the animal, can help calm a person and help them think more clearly. The teams also support first responders who can spend time with the dogs when they are taking a break.

Cindy Elders related to the training attendees examples of how the dog teams have been effective in various crisis incidents. Virginia Tech was an example where both students and mental health professionals relayed that having the dogs on campus

was the best thing the university had done for them. Being able to hug and pet a dog provided comfort during a time of crisis.



Pat and Lionel developed friendships with other dog-owner duos from across the country who had assisted in the aftermaths of the World Trade Center attacks; the Virginia Tech shootings; Hurricane Katrina; the St. Paul, Minn., bridge collapse; and the Greensburg, Kan., tornado.

Pat and Lionel received a Level I certification. This means that they can respond to national disasters with other Level I teams. The airport exercise will be useful if they have to fly to a response. Boarding a 110-pound dog and putting him under a seat was something that they both appreciated having the opportunity to practice.

Pat and Lionel are currently the only team certified in Kentucky. Pat is working to raise awareness of the need for this enhanced training with other therapy groups in the state. She is confident that "first responders" will see the value of having these teams available to assist in a time of crisis.

Pat Seybold and Lionel live in Frankfort and have been a therapy team for four years. They are certified by Love on a Leash a national pet therapy group. Their current activities include the READ program at a local elementary school, Hospice and nursing home work. Lionel is a six year old rescue hound lab mix.