

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

by Wendy Johnson

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Firefighters and emergency medical technicians from the Esko and Scanlon fire departments met at the Esko Fire Hall Monday night for basic rescue training. This was no ordinary rescue training, however, because the “victims” all had four legs, fur – and claws, teeth or hooves that can cause significant injury under extreme circumstances such as fires or accidents.

“This is all about public safety,” emphasized facilitator Dr. Jerry Vanek, a veterinarian and emergency medical technician from Bemidji, as he introduced the rationale behind Basic Animal Rescue Training, known as BART for short.

“If you have more knowledge about what you’re doing when you confront an animal,” said Vanek, “you will find you have a less stressful job and minimize risks to yourself and others.”

Vanek and five other volunteer professionals led the evening’s three-hour session, designed to improve the efficiency of first responders in an emergency situation involving pets and domestic farm animals and maintain personal safety among the people and pets they are there to assist.

Vanek said similar sessions have been held to introduce BART training to some 2,500 emergency responders around the state of Minnesota and the program will soon be expanded to five other states as well. Its programming received official approval from both FEMA and Minnesota Homeland Security last year.

Once a firefighter is BART trained, he or she is available for mutual aid to areas who have not received the training in emergency situations involving animals.

Vanek added that the federal Pets Evacuation and Transportation (PET) Standards Act now requires state and local disaster plans to include provisions for household pets and service animals.

The program was first started by veterinarian Dr. Janet Olson, the wife of a firefighter from the New Brighton Fire Department, after their family dog, Bart, was extricated from their burning home and later died of smoke inhalation because no one from the department knew how to resuscitate him.

The non-profit organization started by Olson is operated by an 11-member board of directors representing emergency responder organizations and the veterinary profession, and training sessions are conducted by 250 trained volunteers, all of them veterinarians, vet techs or students in their programs, along with an assortment of “pet volunteers” used for actual hands-on demonstrations.

Vanek pointed out that statistics show some 60 percent of homes have pets, and many people consider them to be members of the family, sometimes refusing to leave them in times of disaster such as during Hurricane Katrina. Others actually run back into a burning building to try to rescue their pets.

In fact, he said there is a six in 10 chance that a residence to which emergency crews respond will have some type of animal in it, which presents a unique set of circumstances for rescuers.

For example, if an animal is injured or frightened, it may become aggressive and prevent emergency personnel from getting through to the family members in need of rescue.

A horse who has been trapped in a burning building may refuse to leave, or worse yet run back into it after it has been led to safety. A herd of buffalo who have broken out of their enclosure may create an extreme traffic hazard to other motorists or to the emergency personnel on hand to assist.

The emergency medical personnel on hand for Monday’s BART training

in Esko received small group training on animal handling, restraint, first aid assessment and CPR techniques.

While one team was learning how to check the pulse of a yellow lab, as well as assessing her capillary refill reaction, administering oxygen and bandaging wounds, another was learning how to clear the air passage of a giant schnauzer and perform cardio pulmonary resuscitation on “Resusci-Jerry,” a lifelike canine simulator.

Yet another was learning how to blindfold and halter horses and cattle to quiet them and lead them from burning structures, and another was learning how to carry a frantic cat by the scruff of the neck without causing personal harm to themselves, as well as how to restrain aggressive animals through the use of muzzles or snares.

At the conclusion of the session, participants were tested on their knowledge. Another session will be held in coming weeks for the rest of the members of the two departments, and at that time each department will receive an animal emergency rescue kit to augment their standard equipment.

A BART training session is also planned for Moose Lake in January.

For more information on BART training, check the organization’s Web site at www.basicanimalrescuetraining.org.

Wendy Johnson, Publisher
Pine Journal Newspaper
122 Avenue C
Cloquet, MN. 55720
218-879-1950
wjohnson@pinejournal.com