

West-metro fire departments receive animal rescue training

BY Marc Ingber • Sun Newspapers
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BART, a non-profit organization, is operated by volunteers in the veterinary profession and supported by community donations. BART offers classes to first responders teaching restraint and handling of pets, patient assessment/first aid and CPR for companion animals. Departments undergoing training also receive an emergency medical kit.

Bart was 13 and considered a member of the family when he was pulled unresponsive from a fire in his home.

Bart, a German shorthaired pointer, died. But his memory lives in a program designed to prevent pet deaths. His owners, a veterinarian and a firefighter, established BART - Basic Animal Rescue Training - in his memory.

BART has trained more than 2,500 first responders since 2004. Hopkins, St. Louis Park, Edina and Minnetonka firefighters participated in a BART session Feb. 27.

The firefighters learned how to correctly restrain an animal, check its vital signs, apply first aid, and perform mouth-to-nose CPR - animals breathe through their noses.

Those skills have already yielded results for firefighters who participated in BART earlier this month, said Pat Sandon, Hopkins assistant fire chief, who recounted this story:

On Feb. 21, St. Louis Park fire fighters rescued two cats from a house fire in Hopkins. While trying to ventilate one of the cats in the fire engine, the other cat became overly excited and began clawing at everything.

The St. Louis Park firefighters were unsure what to do, but the Hopkins firefighters who had taken BART resolved the situation.

"It shows the value of this training," Sandon said. "We all have the common language and the common knowledge."

The Hopkins, St. Louis Park, Edina and Minnetonka departments plan to participate jointly at least once a quarter in training exercises, Sandon said. The BART session on Feb. 27 was the first in the departments' Intra-Operability Program.

"We just don't interact in a non-emergency setting," Sandon said of the idea behind the Intra-Operability Program. "We wanted to interact in a more personal atmosphere."

In the last two weeks, most members of the Hopkins, St. Louis Park, Edina and Minnetonka Fire Departments have completed BART.

Volunteers in the veterinary profession operate BART, a non-profit organization supported by donations.

"We recognized we have to train people for this," said BART Vice President Karina Burger. "Learning how to deal with pets is really important."

Veterinarian Dr. Janet Olson owned the dog for which BART was named. She founded BART in 2004 after her pet's death.

Bart couldn't be revived because firefighters on the scene didn't have the knowledge and equipment to accommodate an animal.

A large fire at a Plymouth apartment complex last year demonstrated the importance of animal-rescue

training, Burger said. A few hundred pets had to be evacuated and many didn't have leashes. A veterinary clinic that took in the pets eventually ran out of cages.

Four metro-area departments participated in BART after the Plymouth fire, Burger said. The program includes information about resources and facilities firefighters can utilize when rescuing animals.

Animal rescue came into national attention during the Gulf Coast Hurricanes of 2005, Burger said. Many emergency responders didn't know what to do when caring for pets during the crisis.

Many people, Burger said, chose to stay home when their pets were not allowed to be evacuated - at least seven people died as a result, she said. There's a strong bond between people and their pets, she said, so proper animal-rescue procedures can be vital to human safety as well.

After the hurricanes, the federal government passed the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act in 2006, which requires local and state disaster plans to include provisions for household pets and service animals.

Sun-Post Community Editor Wendy Erlien contributed to this article. Comment at our website, www.mnsun.com.

What is BART?

"It also provides first responders with information on how to get help for pets beyond the local level," said BART Vice President Dr. Karina Burger. "And, it provides an opportunity for them to know how to help and have the equipment necessary. It is really gratifying to see the impact of the program."

BART is supported entirely by charitable donations and grants. To make a donation, send a check made out to "BART" to 158 New Brighton Road, New Brighton, MN, 55112, or make a donation online at www.basicanimalrescuetraining.org.