

Understanding basic animal rescue techniques By: Paul M. Malchow

Posted: Wednesday, January 28, 2009 2:03 pm

LE SUEUR – Everyone knows when firefighters have a little time off from battling blazes, they are getting kittens out of trees. But times have changed and so has the concept of animal rescue. Saving animals from traumatic situations has become a science and on Jan. 13 the Le Sueur Fire Department did some serious studying. The firefighters and some of the city and county's first responders spent the evening on the Basic Animal Rescue Training (BART). BART is a Minnesota-based



nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide first responders with the training, knowledge and equipment necessary to safely and effectively handle domestic animals encountered during emergency situations

"We want personnel to be safe in the job they do," said University of Minnesota Veterinary Technician Kim Barrett. "Rescuing animals isn't a first priority, but when (firefighters) have the opportunity to deal with a situation, it's important they know to do it safely, efficiently and effectively."

BART was established by veterinarian Dr. Janet Olson in December 2004 in response to the tragic loss of a pet in a house fire in New Brighton, Minn. The burning home belonged to a firefighter and his 13 year-old German Shorthaired Pointer named Bart was trapped inside. The department was able to put out the fire and locate Bart, but he was unresponsive. The firefighters, who included Dr. Olson's husband, did not have the knowledge base or equipment to help Bart and he died. The entire fire department was deeply affected by this tragedy, feeling helpless to assist one of their own. The BART program has been developed to honor the memory of Bart and to ensure fewer families will suffer a similar loss.

The BART program gained national attention because of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. During recounts of the rescue efforts many emergency personnel spoke of not knowing how or what to do when caring for pets during this time of crisis. Many people chose to stay behind when their pets were not allowed to be evacuated and sadly some of those individuals lost their lives as a result. In response to this tragedy federal legislation entitled the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act was introduced, and was signed into law in October 2006. The PETS Act requires local and state disaster plans to include provisions for household pets and service animals.

The Minneapolis Fire Department embraced BART training after returning from deployment to Louisiana for emergency response and cleanup after Hurricane Katrina. Many local firefighters spent a large portion of their time performing animal rescue and assisting with pet care. More than 440 members of the Minneapolis Fire Department underwent BART training in the spring of 2006. To date Barrett estimates BART has trained and equipped over 2,500 first responder personnel in Minnesota.

Tonight it was the LSFD's turn. Barrett, Dr. Ann Burt of Minneapolis and Veterinary Technician Cassie Panning began the evening with short test to indicate how much the department already knew and what areas needed emphasis. The three professionals created different stations and the firefighters rotated to each one for instruction.

"It's important to have some skills in dealing with animals," Barrett said. "What if you respond to a car accident and there's a vicious dog in the car? What if you respond to a heart attack and a Rottweiler meets you at the door?"

Firefighters not only learned how to safely handle dogs, cats and other household pets, they learned how to check a pet's vitals signs and perform CPR. There was also a little psychology thrown in when it comes to dealing with the attachment between pets and their owners; people and their pets. "It's about honoring the human/animal bond," Barrett said, "and the effect it has on animals in disaster-related situations."

Not only is it important to handle animals safely, but proper technique minimizes response time – time which allows for first aid and assessment of vitals signs.

At the end of the training the firefighters took another test to show what they've learned. The department also received a medical kit with tools to implement the training they have just received. Happily for the fire department and the city, the BART training was free, although the organization does appreciate any gifts.

BART training will soon be going from the woof to the hoof. Due to multiple requests from Fire/EMS departments, BART has added a basic equine and livestock restraint and rescue class to its curriculum and a kit is under development.

To learn more about the BART program, visit www.basicanimalrescuetraining.org.