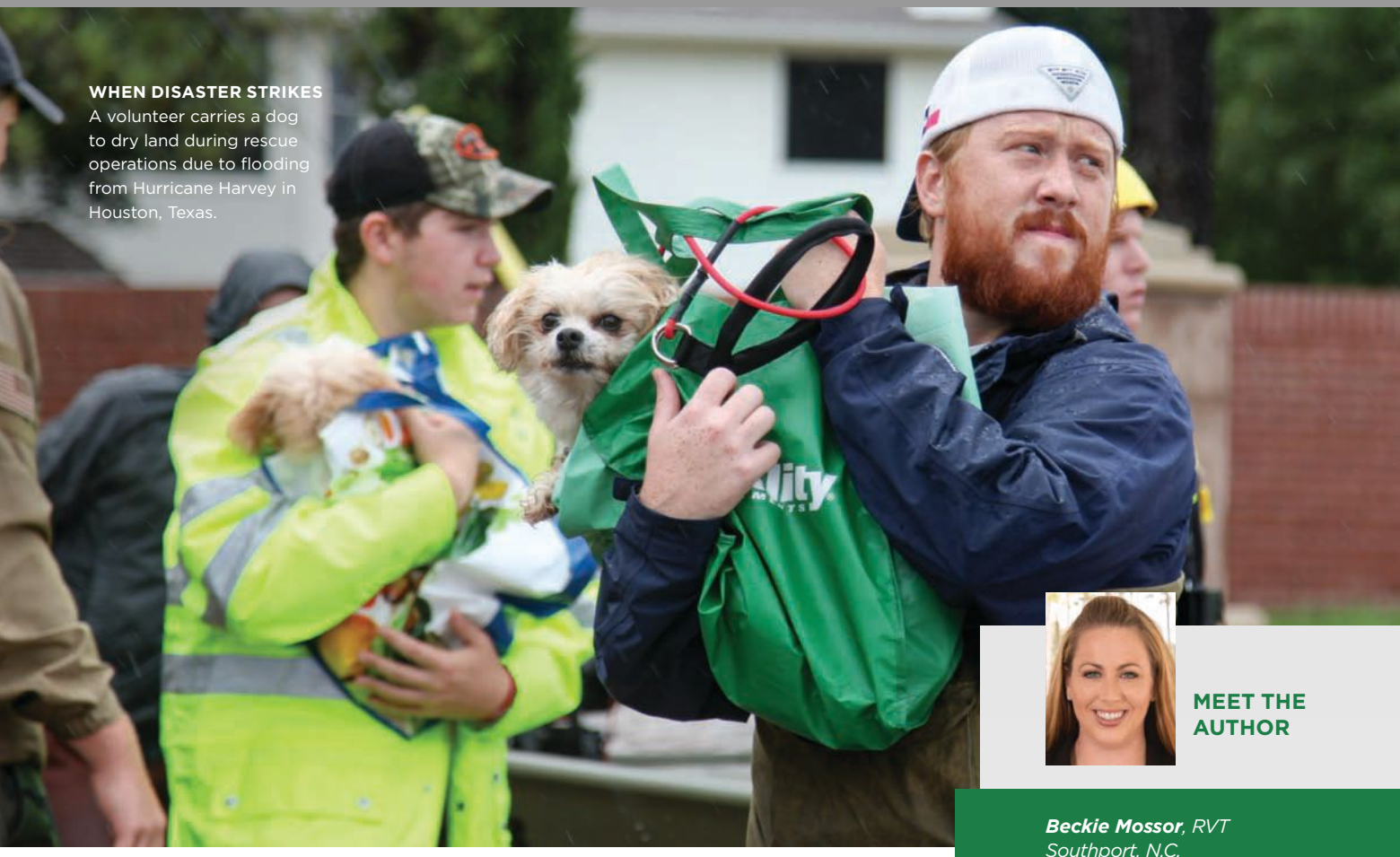

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES
A volunteer carries a dog to dry land during rescue operations due to flooding from Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas.

A Recipe for Disaster Response

The sun was setting against the endless reflection of the water surrounding each side of the road. The water was inching up to the shoulder of the road, getting closer by the second. As I passed the seemingly never-ending line of cars evacuating, I watched the rising floodwater caused by Hurricane Florence inching closer to the road, and I thought, "They aren't going to make it—the water is coming too fast, and there are too many of them. They won't make it out."

MEET THE AUTHOR

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Beckie is a Registered Veterinary Technician living in Southport, North Carolina. Beckie graduated from Central Carolina Community College in 2007 with her AAS in Veterinary Medical Technology and will graduate from the University of North Carolina Pembroke with her Bachelors in Non-Profit and Public Administration in 2019. Beckie has enjoyed a diverse career in small animal, large animal, and mixed practices; academia; and management and consulting. Beckie co-founded Veterinary Advancement, is a professional medical responder with the ASPCA Field Investigations Response (FIR) Team, is Volunteer Director of Operations 3K9 Working Dogs, and co-hosts the podcast Veterinary Viewfinder.

John Glaser/CSM (Cal Sport Media via AP Images). Opposite: Courtesy ASPCA

I can't imagine what they were thinking about me—driving in the opposite direction of the evacuating cars. Into the flooding, into the danger they were racing to escape. But driving toward the danger is part of the job when you work or volunteer in disaster response.

For me, the response to this disaster was personal. Florence hit my home state—my actual home for that matter. My North Carolina county was ground zero for where Hurricane Florence was expected to make landfall, and I had already been evacuated from my home when I got the call to deploy. I was grateful to finally have something constructive to do during my evacuation rather than sitting, holed up in my sister's home, with my life on hold. Time suspended amidst the worry about the condition of our own home and helplessness of seeing the condition of our home state. When I saw the text, "Are you able to deploy to Lumberton?" I answered with a resounding, "#$@&%*, yes!"

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

When floods, fires, hurricanes, mudslides, and other natural disasters strike, chaos ensues. But within the chaos, there is a group of individuals who are organized, trained, and prepared to mobilize and bring order where there is complete turmoil, panic, and upheaval. They are trained to respond and to recover in the face of devastation, disaster, and crisis. These first responders are trained in many areas: EMS, Fire and Rescue, and police. Within this group, but often overlooked, are the veterinary response teams. These groups provide the veterinary medical care, disease management, and public health conservation required in times of disaster and disease outbreak.

After Hurricane Katrina, studies showed 44% of the people who opted not to evacuate for the storm cited their pets as at least part of the reason they chose not to leave.[1] Americans saw horrific images on TV of suffering in both humans and animals, but they only saw a fraction of what happened during and after the storm. In some cases, people were forced to leave their pets behind. In others, when people with their pets reached rescue boats or buses, they were denied boarding. Many searched in vain for a shelter that accepted pets along with their humans. Mass euthanasia was performed. Some even risked their lives to stay behind to care for abandoned pets.[1]

Because of this, H.R. 3858—the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act—was signed into law in October 2006.[2] This law enables FEMA to rescue and care for individuals with pets and animals affected by disasters or emergencies.[2] Additionally, the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act and the National Response Framework were created as a plan to help ensure more communication between various government groups and supporting organizations in times of disaster and emergency.[2]

For all responders, disaster and emergency response generally involves working closely with local, state, and federal agencies to assist where local services are overwhelmed. For veterinary teams, this is often providing veterinary care in local permanent or temporary shelters to serve affected animals. Local shelters may allow owners to drop off animals for care if there are no local pet-friendly emergency shelters. These animal shelters generally see an increased number of animals rescued or picked up by animal control and other emergency service teams, and they are often not staffed or stocked with supplies to serve the needs of this acute increase in animal population and may call on the assistance of disaster response teams. Emergency shelters may be erected in conjunction with or alongside human shelters, allowing for animals and humans to evacuate together. While sheltered, these animals require daily care, treatment of existing conditions, or treatment of conditions or injuries related to the disaster or emergency event. Veterinary personnel in disaster response, in conjunction with the overseeing organizing bodies, care for the individual animals as well as aid in the overall organization and structure of the emergency shelter. These individuals provide intimate knowledge and

Beckie at work with the ASPCA FIR Team. Each role is vital, including ensuring the animals are calm and happy.

Getting involved with disaster response is a very rewarding challenge. The opportunity to aid animals and their owners in a time of stress and great need is truly an honor and calling.

execution of disease control, sanitation management, and as low-stress husbandry as can be afforded given the situation.

THE DISASTER RESPONSE DIFFERENCE

Disaster response can be very different from traditional practice, and veterinary personnel should be prepared to face unique challenges and working conditions. Veterinary responders in disaster situations can expect high-stress but very rewarding work while activated. These individuals are often exposed to human and animal suffering, few supplies, long days, and often dangerous situations. Responders should be prepared to be flexible in their work duties, as anyone can be assigned to any task that takes priority. So, while one may activate in response as a veterinary responder, they may find themselves assigned to daily care duties of feeding and cleaning, building projects to erect appropriate facilities for the animals, or a variety of tasks that change from day to day.

Getting involved with disaster response is a very rewarding challenge. The opportunity to aid animals and their owners in a time of stress and great need is truly an honor and calling. There is some specialized training involved in disaster response depending on the organization. Many organizations require basic Incident Command Training, which is offered free of charge through the National Incident Management System (NIMS) at **https://training.fema.gov/nims**, but specific requirements will be provided by the organization. For more information on training or other training opportunities go to **avma.org/KB/Resources/Reference/disaster/Pages/Disaster-Preparedness-Disaster-Training.aspx**.

When disaster strikes many people are drawn to help, and in an industry of healers and helpers, the members of the veterinary community are no different. Often the helplessness of people and animals affected draws individuals to mobilize and bring supplies or volunteer their time.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Having organizations to channel these volunteers is essential, and ensuring that individuals go through these organizations is crucial to the safety and welfare of all those involved. Many well-meaning volunteers "self-deploy" and can become part of the problem, detract from valuable and limited resources, or stray from the essential chain-of-command system that is in place to regain structure where chaos is present. Any interested individual should contact local, state, or federal agencies to ensure they have the proper training, communication, and accountability in disaster response. Here are a few federal organizations that can provide more information:

- **avmf.org/whatwedo/veterinary-medical-assistance-teams**
- **aspcapro.org/field-investigations-response**
- **phe.gov/preparedness/responders/ndms/ndms-teams/pages/nvrt.aspx**

Most states also have resources available and can provide additional volunteer deployment and training opportunities. Regardless of the level of involvement and to what scale, the veterinary community plays an imperative role in disaster and emergency response management and provides care opportunities for the furry, feathered, and scaled members of our community.

These members can't ask for help or save themselves and are often the true victims of disasters. With the proper training, coordination, and involvement we may not be able to prevent disasters and emergencies, but we can alter the course of suffering and stress, and that is what we, as the veterinary community, do best. **TVN**

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