



The George R. Brown Convention Center became home to hundreds of pets and their owners after Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston.

Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging, Flickr.*

A First Time for Everything: Harvey's Cohabitated Animal Shelter

By Anna Mayzenberg

The first day the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB) opened as a Hurricane Harvey shelter, pet owners arriving there, having escaped the floodwaters, faced a horrible dilemma: stay outside in the rain to comfort their pets or abandon them to stay dry themselves. The Red Cross, which frequently manages disaster shelters, such as GRB, does not generally allow pets due to concerns about cleanliness, disorderly animals, and the safety of disaster evacuees with respiratory conditions. As a result, some pet owners endanger their own lives by refusing to evacuate because they are afraid their pets will die if left behind. Salise Shuttlesworth, founder and executive director at Friends For Life Shelter, could not sit by and watch this happen. As she came to understand both the concerns of the Red Cross and the necessity of providing a potentially life-saving shelter, she was determined to reconcile the two issues. By bridging that gap during Harvey, she affirmed that for “the first time in U.S. history, a cohabitated shelter [was] pre-approved by a city and carried out in a mega-shelter in a major U.S. city.”¹

The City of Houston opened the GRB shelter on August 27, 2017, when other facilities became overwhelmed with evacuees. After seeing the distress of pet owners the first night, associate medical director for Houston Fire Department Emergency Medical Services (HFD EMS) and a member of the city's animal advisory committee, Dr. Chris Souders, worked alongside committee members to obtain approvals to designate a section of the shelter for people with their pets. After receiving approval, Souders contacted Shuttlesworth, who volunteered to set up the space and manage it, determined to demonstrate that a cohabitated pet

shelter was not inherently dangerous and dirty; done right, it could be a place of comfort and safety. In doing so, she set a precedent for the future.²

In establishing the shelter protocols, Shuttlesworth, also an attorney, duplicated the policies used by Friends For Life to assuage concerns about cleanliness and public safety. Shuttlesworth remembered being apprehensive when the Houston Health Department representative came to evaluate the cohabitated shelter; much to Shuttlesworth's relief, the woman became the shelter's fan, remarking, “It is so clean. This animal area is cleaner than the human areas! And I just cannot find a single thing to ding you guys on.” In turn, because cleanliness was such a priority, and the non-pet owners were in a separate area, allergies did not become an issue. To address the potentially unwieldy animals, such as those with storm phobia, Friends For Life had sedatives available should they be needed. Following the carefully crafted protocols kept worries at bay and offered pet owners a safe haven with their animals at their sides.³

To further ensure safety, Friends For Life immediately vaccinated every animal that arrived at the GRB shelter. With 1,500 animals passing through the facility in an eighteen-day time frame — 90 percent of which had never seen a veterinarian before — this policy resulted in zero cases of canine parvovirus or distemper in the shelter. Given how contagious and dangerous these diseases are, avoiding them was remarkable.

The shelter also prioritized the general health of the animals. Dr. Katie Eick, a local veterinarian with a mobile unit, came to the rescue, offering her services to the shelter. Shuttlesworth said that as soon as they told Eick they

needed her help, “she raked her arm down her supply shelves at her pharmacy in her clinic and dumped it into ... tubs. And she showed up!”⁷⁴ She started seeing animals right away.

Once animal health was managed, the staff turned its attention to food and supplies. Organizers set up drop off zones and posted them on Facebook for people who wanted to donate but could not get downtown. Thus, thousands of pounds of food and supplies came into the shelter, essentially creating a pet shop full of items available free of charge.

As evacuees came into the cohabitated shelter, every animal received a number and a bracelet that matched numbered bracelets given to all of the people in their family; any supplies, such as crates, beds, or leashes, were also tagged with that number. As one person recorded all the pet owner’s information, another entered it into a spreadsheet by the assigned number, giving the shelter an accessible, searchable database. Pet owners used the tags to get food or supplies for their animals at the supply station.

The number system allowed people to stay with their pets and take care of them, freeing the Friends For Life team to triage 1,500 animals and manage the shelter protocols. Of course, some people could not provide all the care themselves. Shuttlesworth described “people who were not mobile, seniors, who couldn’t come to the station every day and get the food to their animal, or couldn’t walk their dog outside,” so “[the shelter] had teams that just walked around the facility to make sure that people had what they needed.”⁷⁵

Friends For Life’s experience running its shelter provided the model for the GRB shelter’s success. The staff was trained in this type of work; they had specific guidelines and written standard operating procedures to follow. “What we did was basically set up a mini Friends For Life,” Shuttlesworth explained. “We checked in people and kept data like we do at our front desk. We practiced a heart of service and non-judgement, as is our culture. We took into account the human part of the human-animal equation.”⁷⁶ They simply adapted what they knew to meet the needs on a much larger scale.

The cohabitated shelter was not perfect, and, as always in a disaster, it is important to learn from what went wrong. The most critical lesson learned was that organizers must have a plan to assist people when the shelter closes. Dr. David Persse, public health authority for the City of Houston



Donations were plentiful at the shelter, with pet food, crates, and more coming in from across Houston. These supplies ensured that even people who came in with almost nothing could take care of their animals.

Photo courtesy of Friends For Life.

and physician director of HFD EMS, pointed out, “One of the most difficult things about a shelter operation is closing the shelter. Because while a significant number of folks want to get back home as quick as they can, there are a lot of folks who don’t have a home to go back to anymore.”⁷⁷

The same applied to the cohabitated shelter area. Although they did their best to accommodate requests for help, Friends For Life lacked the facilities to care for a large number of animals while people looked for housing. Nor did the staff have experience finding people places to stay post-shutdown. While the city works to place people in temporary housing, Shuttlesworth emphasized the importance of also making pet-friendly housing available so people are not once again faced with giving up their pets to ensure their own safety.

Friends For Life collaborated with the American National Red Cross, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry to create a manual that thoroughly explains how to start and successfully operate a cohabitated shelter, based on research data and lived experience. It is available to download on the Friends For Life website.



Having found a safe haven, a dog rests on an American Red Cross blanket. The change in policy to allow pets in the shelter was a big step forward in responding to disasters.

Photo courtesy of Friends For Life.

Ultimately, the shelter was a success, from cleanliness to comfort. In fact, it was so comfortable that people without pets sometimes came to spend time in the cohabitated area because it had a sense of peace about it. Shuttlesworth attributes this, in part, to people and their animals comforting each other, adding, “You cannot possibly overstate how important [that emotional connection] is.”⁷⁸ Houston’s first foray into cohabitated shelters proved that animals and people can and should be together in a disaster.

Anna Mayzenberg is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in management information systems with a minor in phronêsis from the Honors College at the University of Houston. She is a *Houston History* intern and aspires to have a writing career.