

KATRINA: THE AFTERMATH: Animal victims find refuge

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GONZALES, La. — From shoulders to skinny tail, the tiny gray kitten was coated in oily muck that stank of sewage. But when Renee Plumley of Roswell pulled on rubber gloves and picked him up, he nestled under her chin.

"All this trauma and he still knows how to be a cat," Plumley said. "He's purring up a storm."

Over her shoulder, other volunteers formed a bucket brigade, swinging carriers filled with animals from New Orleans' partially drained Gentilly neighborhood out of a packed van and into the hands of waiting veterinarians.

Behind the van, 11 other vehicles idled, waiting their turn to shuttle shivering, emaciated cats and dogs into the Lamar–Dixon Expo Center — normally an agricultural fairgrounds, and now the first stage of a nationwide effort dedicated to saving Katrina's animal victims.

Volunteers from across the United States and supply shipments from around the world have converged on the dark green barns more than 50 miles north of New Orleans. The expo center — which is being run by the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals with the assistance of the Humane Society of the United States, the U.S. Public Health Service and a slate of nonprofit organizations — has become Louisiana's largest animal shelter.

It has been a temporary stopping point for more than 3,000 animals and currently houses 1,300 along with more than 400 horses. And it is full to bursting: Though crews scouring New Orleans by van and boat pick up more animals every day, they leave many more behind — with a stash of food and water — because the center cannot take additional animals until some are adopted or ferried to temporary shelters out of state.

Some of the animals arrive needing little more than a bath, a meal and a place to recover from the stress of being stranded, said Dr. Don Gardner, a Public Health Service captain and veterinary pathologist from Montana. Others have broken legs, lacerations, severe dehydration or chemical burns from contaminated floodwater.

Every pet brought into the center is washed, photographed, checked by veterinarians, dewormed, vaccinated and microchipped for identification before being tucked into the expo center's metal-walled stalls.

Barns 5 and 2 are for dogs; 4 and 3 hold horses, mules and goats; and 1 contains all the cats, a slew of exotics — snakes, rabbits, hamsters, ferrets and mice — and a complete animal hospital staffed by a federal veterinary disaster team from New York.

Photos, descriptions and whatever is known about an animal's provenance are taped to the cages and listed on the Web site www.petfinder.com [http://www.petfinder.com] in hopes of reuniting pets and owners. Everyone who comes into the facility must register and wear a name tag. The ones given to anxious pet owners bear their first names and the species of pet they are searching for.

The tag worn by Holly Zemke, a woman from the Lakeview neighborhood, said "Cat." She had three. "The place where we were going, they have eight dogs," she said. "We left them plenty of food and water. We thought we would be back in three days."

Zemke did not find her cats. Other owners were luckier. Late Saturday afternoon, Roosevelt Allen and Maleaca Vincent of New Orleans prowled the barns, checking every cage.

Vincent's tag said "Puppy litter." The engaged couple fled to Shreveport, leaving their three adult dogs and nine puppies with an upstairs neighbor who vowed he would stay through the storm.

They reached their flooded apartment for the first time Saturday to find the neighbor gone, the mother dog dead in the yard, the other dogs and all of the puppies missing, and a note on the door saying the dogs had been rescued.

In barn 5, they found one of the adult dogs, and a neighbor's dog as well. In a stall on the sunny side of barn 2, they found three of the puppies.

"We didn't know if they would be here, but we had to come," Vincent said, hugging the animals while one chewed on her bracelet. "We hoped. We prayed."