

# Parting the Waters

## Out of Katrina's ruins, a haven emerges

Even before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, life for homeless pets in Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish was no day at the dog park.

The animal shelter was a ramshackle collection of trailers, outbuildings, and outdoor cages unprotected from the weather. By some accounts, it was also a warehouse for unwanted pets, badly understaffed, and constantly in need of basic repairs. There was no air conditioning to stave off the swampy Louisiana heat, and during winter cold snaps, only a few space heaters provided warmth.

Then came Katrina, leaving unimaginable destruction in its wake and forcing a mass exodus from the flooded parish where almost every home had become uninhabitable. For nearly two years, the shelter's main building lacked its own sources of electricity and running water, relying on wires and hoses from a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer.

By the time Cathy Landry joined the shelter in September 2007, she was one of two people on the skeleton staff, handling cleaning and animal care while the director did everything else. "It was a nightmare. ... We had outside kennels where we had dogs housed, and they had to stay out all the time," says Landry, now the shelter's secretary. "The cats were in crates, and they were stacked three high."

But following an arduous road to recovery, the agency reached a milestone in January, opening a new facility that's nearly twice as large as its pre-Katrina operation. The \$1.25 million bill was footed by FEMA funds, insurance proceeds, and a \$250,000 grant and other in-kind assistance from The HSUS.

Now employing six people, St. Bernard can house twice the animals it once could—64 dogs and 30 cats. Dogs can move freely between indoor and outdoor runs, and they have a large play area and agility course. Separate ventilation systems help keep germs from sick animals away from the rest of the population.

"The community now has a place where they can go to adopt pets and find lost animals, as well as a place that they can be proud to call their animal shelter," says Melissa Seide Rubin, HSUS vice president for animal care centers and veterinary services.



The Jan. 11 grand opening of the St. Bernard Parish Animal Shelter in Violet, La., drew officials from The Humane Society of the United States, the ASPCA, the Louisiana SPCA, and the local government, as well as many visitors.



The Houndquarters building and new play area offer dogs plenty of room to roam; they can access exercise space through doggie doors in their kennels. They won't get muddy paws, once the grass starts growing.

The latest development in The HSUS's multimillion-dollar effort to help rebuild the Gulf Coast's animal services infrastructure, the relief package for the St. Bernard Animal Shelter includes joint funding (with the ASPCA) of its executive director po-

sition for three years. The purchase of a new \$80,000 transport vehicle, also jointly funded by The HSUS and the ASPCA, will help the shelter bring animals to more populated areas where they will have a better chance of adoption.

## Survey Says ... Get a Cat!

### Results reveal mixed perceptions of felines— and some surprising demographics

BY ARNA COHEN

As the human population has slowly regenerated—to about 60 percent of its pre-Katrina levels—so too has the number of pets. Those strays who survived the hurricane continued breeding, and many people who lost everything to the storm have not been able to afford services for their animals. With support from The HSUS, Louisiana State University veterinarians and veterinary students have helped address the problem by performing spay/neuter surgeries and providing general care at the shelter.

New executive director Beth Brewster is now helping guide the shelter's recovery. Before taking the job at St. Bernard Parish Animal Control in October 2008, Brewster served for three years as director of St. Tammany Humane Society, a private, not-for-profit shelter in Covington, La.

The Louisiana SPCA helped find the new executive director, according to Rubin. "[Brewster] was looking for a job, and she wanted a challenge. And boy, she got it," Rubin says, laughing. "Everyone thought she was wonderful; she had a very good reputation."

The building itself, though, is the jewel in the Mardi Gras crown. Brewster views the new Houndquarters facility as "paradise"—easier to clean, more comfortable for the animals, a more pleasant place for staff to work and people to visit.

Its grand opening is yet another affirmation that the hurricane-ravaged St. Bernard Parish is moving on, says parish president Craig Taffaro Jr. A four-year collaboration with local, state, and national organizations—including the Louisiana SPCA and the Arlene and Joseph Meraux Charitable Foundation—has fulfilled the parish's decade-long wish to modernize its animal services operations.

"You know the [saying] 'Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings'?" Taffaro asks. "That's what this is. Every time we cut a [grand-opening] ribbon, it's one more acknowledgement that our community is back. We are not going to be beaten by the storm." 🐾



While cats are the most popular pet in the United States, there are still thousands in animal shelters waiting for loving homes. In an effort to boost cat adoptions and save lives, the Morris Animal Foundation, a non-profit that funds research studies to advance animal health and welfare, surveyed 1,102 non-cat owners about their perceptions of cats to gain insight into what may be preventing them from finding those homes. The results show that the next wave of cat owners may come from unexpected segments of society.

More cats than dogs live in American households today—93.6 million felines versus 77.5 million dogs. Yet the American Humane Association estimates that nearly three-quarters of cats who enter shelters are euthanized.

The Morris Foundation had been meeting with different groups concerned about cats, says Patricia Olson, D.V.M., the foundation's president and CEO. "It seemed that the pet industry was very interested in people who have cats to see if they could be persuaded to take one more. ... But I thought it would be fun for our foundation to gather some information about why people don't have them in the first place," she says.

The participants in the survey did not currently own cats, had never previously owned one, and had never previously considered owning one. Not surprisingly, more than half of the respondents had an overall negative attitude about felines, expressing concerns about their furniture scratching, hairball coughing, and counter jumping.

Other common concerns included the litter box smell, unprovoked biting, and a perception that cats couldn't get along with other pets. Nearly one-third of respondents said someone in the household was allergic to cats.

On the bright side, about 20 percent of respondents said they might consider a feline pet. What they liked best about cats was that they're playful, can entertain themselves, and make people smile. These respondents indicated that they would most likely adopt a cat from a shelter or rescue group.

Olson believes the pet industry should focus on this group. Many of the problems respondents identified can be readily addressed, she says, with solutions like behavioral training, scratching posts, and specific diets.

The most surprising results were the demographics of the 20 percent that would consider getting a cat. "If you asked me what population would be a good target, I would have said older women like myself," Olson says. "It turns out we didn't do so well!"

The survey instead found that 18-to-24-year-olds had a more positive attitude toward cats than older respondents. Singles, suburbanites, Hispanics, and men also responded more positively when compared to married participants, urban and rural residents, other ethnicities, and women, respectively—but according to the Morris Animal Foundation, very little marketing is being done to these groups.

"We who already have cats are 'low-hanging fruit,'" Olson says. "We're saying to the industry that they're missing a whole population out there who could be your next group of customers that could take care of these animals."

Based on the survey's results, the foundation posits that if just 10 percent of non-cat-owning households in the U.S. would consider adopting one, an additional 6.2 million cats could be placed in loving homes, greatly reducing the number in animal shelters.

For complete results of the survey, visit [morriscatfoundation.org/cattitudes](http://morriscatfoundation.org/cattitudes). 🐾