

# *Companion Animal Welfare in Natural Disaster Emergency Management*

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At 3.32 am on April the 6th 2009, after a seismic swarm lasted several months, an earthquake of 5.8 on the Richter scale, whose epicentre was the town of L’Aquila, struck an extensive area on the eastern side of the central Apennines, causing the deaths of 306 people, the injury of another 1500 and forcing around 65,000 to abandon their homes. The severity of the event, the high population density in the affected territory and the need for the total evacuation of towns and villages destroyed by the earthquake, with the complete prohibition of access to the historical centres ("red zones"), rapidly put at stake the welfare of the local companion animals. The immediate activation of a veterinary task force coordinated by the Director of the Istituto “G.Caporale” (IZS A&M), by appointment of the Civil Protection Department, enabled the identification, mobilisation and ready availability of the resources necessary to meet the emergency, in order to identify the animal needs, to plan the interventions and to implement all the necessary measures for a rapid recovery. A surveillance system consisting of four essential steps (to know, to plan, to act and to evaluate) was promptly activated and supported by a veterinary emergency management team, named "Veterinary Action". All the activities were constantly monitored in order to take the corrective measures, on field training was also provided for specific issues. This organizational structure was articulated in three interconnected subunits, specifically dedicated to “Food safety”, “Farm animal” and "Companion animal” health and welfare, with the last one fully involved into the assistance of the canine and feline population remaining in the seismic area or displaced elsewhere along with the evacuated population. The actions related to companion animal assistance were planned in the “Province of L’Aquila 2009-2011 Stray Animals Control Plan”, approved by the Ministry of Health, Department for Veterinary Health, Nutrition and Food Safety. All interventions were carried out jointly by the IZS A&M, L’Aquila and Abruzzo region Local Veterinary Services, the Nucleo Antisofisticazioni e Sanità (NAS) Carabinieri, the L’Aquila Province Board of Veterinarians and animal protection NGOs.

IZS A&M in particular was able to supply not only its own knowledge and skills in the area of animal welfare, urban veterinary hygiene, staff training and laboratory diagnostics, but also all the instruments necessary to restore the institutional communication system. This challenging experience demonstrated yet again how the quality of life of animals is directly proportional to the value they represent for the local community. At the same time it provided an opportunity to test, for the first time in the history of natural disasters, an integrated emergency management system in which public and private veterinarians, public health professionals, volunteers and the community itself acted alongside the Civil Protection in order to evacuate and assist all the companion animals, whether owned or strays, affected by the earthquake. The extremely hard and intense work required both technical and empathic skills, highlighting the importance of sharing the values and respecting the rules associated with decisional and operational flexibility. The encountered difficulties underlined the critical role of efficient, accurate and prompt communication both inside and outside the system. For the future, the construction of specific guidelines will be needed to develop sufficiently dynamic operational procedures, to be reviewed and updated according to the different public health priorities, the availability of new technologies and the evolution of the regulatory framework, as well as to the different possible hazards and to the expected scenarios. Specific training and continuing education activities will be of outmost importance, in order to ensure qualitative standards and guarantee the correct functioning of the proposed model. A detailed report, containing all the data collected during the assistance of companion animals, will be published in a monographic issue of the scientific journal "Veterinaria Italiana".