A One Health approach to emergency preparedness in health and social services

Incorporating animal care into emergency social services planning

Introduction

- Yukon is disproportionately vulnerable to climate change given the elevated exposure to arctic environmental change and high sensitivity of social systems (1-4).
- Climate change effects on Yukoners’ health will include impacts from increased extreme weather events, and this will likely result in an increasing need for emergency health and social services responses in Yukon (5).
- Experience has shown that failing to account for animals during an evacuation decreases mental and physical safety, and increases health and financial risk for both evacuees and emergency rescue workers (6-10).
- The challenges of assisting animals during a disaster have been well documented and can be used as lessons learned (6,7,9,11,12).
- The Government of Yukon, Department of Health and Social Services (HSS) is planning to use a One Health approach to address vulnerabilities in emergency management by incorporating an animal care plan.

Strengths and Challenges

- During the 2018 wildfire responses in Yukon, the need for animal care was minimal and successfully absorbed by the communities hosting evacuees.
- The small population of Yukon facilitated rapid spread of awareness of the potential need for emergency animal sheltering.
- However, during advanced planning, HSS workers identified vulnerabilities related to available accommodations for animals, and clarity of scope and policies.
- During the work completed to date, challenges have also emerged related to local capacity for animal care, experience with natural disaster responses, data on the existing and varied domestic animal populations, and diversity in cultural and socio-economic views of animals.

Approach

- Several local factors need to be accounted for in emergency animal care planning (11,13).
- A One Health approach would involve participatory planning methods that incorporate local values and beliefs, which can increase acceptability, feasibility, and implementation of emergency plans (14,15).
- The approach will include creating collaborative teams which can identify critical planning information, and acquire technical animal care training to be rapidly called to action for local emergency responses.
- Early engagement with some organizations has already taken place, with positive reception. Knowledge exchange activities will be planned for the near future.
- Human health considerations such as zoonotic disease transmission, potential for trauma due to bites, kicks, and scratches, and allergic reactions will also need to be explicitly addressed (16).

Conclusion

- Planning for animals during an emergency response is an emerging best practice in emergency planning and preparedness. Yukon faces unique socio-demographic and geographic challenges when responding to natural disaster emergencies, compared to southern jurisdictions.
- Participatory planning methods, documented emergency animal care plans, and building local capacity for emergency animal care response, can mitigate the risk of increased natural disasters posed by climate change in the north. This ultimately can lead to increased community resiliency, health, and wellness.

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