

## In future evacuations, pets may come too

January 04, 2013

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### THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Authorities are working to ease bans on animals in evacuee housing, after some families uprooted by the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster suffered further distress when officials told them to shut pets in cars outside--or abandon them altogether.

Not all local governments ban pets in evacuation centers and apartments. But some that do are now rewriting the rules, recognizing the emotional value of pets for people recently made homeless.

"Pets are part of the family," said dog owner and former evacuee Kayoko Suzuki, 51, from Motomiya in Fukushima Prefecture. "Local officials should be more flexible so that families and their pets are not separated during evacuation."

Suzuki fled with her family and three dogs after the disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 plant in March 2011.

She traveled to the distant city of Toyama, in Toyama Prefecture, which offered vacant public housing. But officials there said: no pets.

Suzuki and her family settled in nevertheless, locking the dogs--toy poodles aged 5, 4 and 2--in the car outside. They would take turns in going out to check on the dogs.

Despite this awkward arrangement, the presence of the pets helped Suzuki's family hold up at a time of exhaustion and great stress. They were living in a place where they knew nobody--and they had an uncertain future.

The dogs also broke the ice with local residents when the family took them for walks. People would stop and pet the poodles.

Suzuki's family ended up renting a house from a local animal-lover--a member of an animal protection society--who was happy to allow the dogs in the building. But that was in late March, 2011, and just a few weeks later, the family returned home.

Suzuki said she learned one lesson in particular: Pet owners should prepare. She now stockpiles three months of pet food and toilet sheets for their animals.

Ibaraki Prefecture is among the local governments now addressing calls for change. The tsunami swamped some coastal districts and the quake damaged many homes or left the land beneath them unstable.

Five of the prefecture's 44 local governments ban pets at evacuation centers.

One is Miho village. A Miho official explained that some residents are allergic to or simply don't like animals.

"It is hard to say what pet owners should do in that case, but pets can either be kept in cars or tied up at the abandoned house temporarily," the official said.

In June last year, prefectural authorities established a panel to investigate changes, and it produced a draft proposal recommending that municipalities set up pens for pets at evacuation centers.

Furthermore, prefectural officials are drafting new guidelines for municipalities to refer to when evacuating residents and their pets. Both measures fall under nonbinding environment ministry guidelines.

However, changes will need to clear multiple hurdles at the prefectural and local level.

Ibaraki officials warn it could be some time before all municipalities offer a pets--welcome approach. And ultimately, it is the municipalities, not the prefectural government, that carry out evacuations.

Disaster-struck Iwate Prefecture drew up similar guidelines in November.

These will require owners to possess a cage for their animal and emergency supplies of pet food. They will also urge local governments to set aside space at evacuation centers for the pet cages.

Because of the restrictions in 2011 and 2012, there was considerable demand from dog and cat owners for temporary care for their pets.

One organization that tried to meet this was the Tokyo Metropolitan Animal Relief Center, which was set up in response to the disaster.

Veterinarian Chizuko Yamaguchi, the director, said the center took care of 36 animals--at a cost of about 18 million yen (\$207,000), excluding construction costs.

"If owners and their pets remain together while evacuating, it would save money and reduce the sense of loss," Yamaguchi said. "It will be also good in terms of hygiene and the ecology of the affected area."

The center closed in September.

Meanwhile, some families parted from their pets may have to suffer that loss for ever.

As 29-year-old Yumiko Watanabe scrambled in 2011 to flee her home near the nuclear plant, firefighters urged her to leave behind her 3-year-old cat, Azuki.

Watanabe is currently living in an apartment in Nishi-Aizu, Fukushima Prefecture, with her 8-year-old daughter, Urara, and has returned only once to their abandoned home, in summer that year. The cat was not there.

Watanabe, from Tomioka, Fukushima Prefecture, has requested help in finding the cat from the prefectural veterinarian association and an animal protection center established by the prefectural government.

Whenever the center's website reports that a cat resembling hers has been found, she visits the center to check. But each time she returns disappointed.

"When I left home, I thought that in a few days' time, I would be returning," she said.

(This article was written by Yosuke Akai and Atsushi Takahashi.)

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## **TIPS FOR EVACUATION WITH PETS**

Find out if your local evacuation center allows pets. If not, find a place that does

Train the pet to accept living in a cage

Try to train a dog not to bark

Keep its vaccinations up to date

Stockpile enough food and water for five days or more

Make sure that the pet wears a name tag or a microchip with contact details

To prepare for the worst--and a possible later hunt for a missing animal--keep photos on your mobile phone

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