

HURRICANE KATRINA PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTERMATH: CREATE AN EVACUATION PLAN FOR YOU AND YOUR PETS

Public health officials meeting at the U.S. Psychiatric and Mental Health Congress in New Orleans shared information on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, its mental health effects on the public, and on service care delivery.

In his talk on "Katrina Brain: acute cognitive impairment" Dr. K. Sukauya stated that public health officials can learn important lessons in disaster preparedness from Katrina. An effective plan to maintain mental health care in the event of a natural disaster should include certain elements.

Fourteen Angels Foundation has been highlighting the losses and tragedy that can be avoided, if families and rescue operations take pet evacuation from disaster sites into account. Abandoning a beloved pet to die takes an enormous psychological toll on children and adults alike, who lose everything in a disaster. Many elderly chose to die with their pets, rather than abandon them.

Dr. Sukauya summarized the following planning strategies for public health:

- How to fill prescriptions when the usual pharmacy system fails. In New Orleans, prescriptions were filled on an "honor" basis, which led to abuse of the system by those seeking controlled substances, Dr. Sakauye said.
- How doctors can communicate with patients when phone and electrical service are no longer available. In New Orleans, some doctors found that despite their cell phone service being unavailable, they could still communicate with patients on their cell phones via text messaging, Dr. Sakauye said.
- How to ensure access to medical records when patients have been evacuated to a new location. Ideally, electronic backup should be easily available and located in a secondary location, Dr. Sakauye said.

Finally, a plan to ensure the safety of pets may be important, especially for the elderly. Many elderly residents of New Orleans refused to evacuate because they could not take their pets with them. Many of these residents died with their beloved animals, Dr. Sakauye said.

Primary source: U.S. Psychiatric & Mental Health Congress

Source reference: Sakauye K. "Katrina brain: acute cognitive impairment." U.S. Psychiatric & Mental Health Congress, New Orleans, La., November 16-19, 2006.