

Milford, Bellingham, Franklin get oxygen masks for pets

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Like people, pets saved from the dark, thick, acrid smoke of a raging fire need pure air. Minutes matter, and without an oxygen mask that fits properly, the chances for survival are slim.

The Massachusetts Veterinarian Medical Association Charities Inc. this year launched a campaign to supply every community in the state with pet oxygen masks. As part of the initiative, fire departments in Milford, Bellingham and Franklin — along with more than 100 others — received specialized masks this month.

"Usually in a fire, these animals would be overcome by smoke," said Bellingham Fire Chief Steve Gentile. "If you get to them quick enough, like you would with a person, you can start giving them oxygen and revive them."

In many cases, dogs or cats are exposed to smoke longer, unable to flee on their own, Milford Fire Chief John Touhey said.

"Often, the pets will hide, and they can't get out," Touhey said.

Each town received a set of three masks made to fit dogs and cats. The association hopes to place a mask kit in all of the state's 452 fire stations.

Dr. Susan Adams-Conley, president of the Bellingham Animal Hospital, said a generic mask sometimes hurts rather than helps, as the process of trying to fit it onto the pet can cause the animal stress.

"Unless you have an animal with a really pushed in face like a bull dog or Persian cat," she said. "But normally the masks will not fit the normal dog or cat."

She said that when an animal rescued from a fire is brought to a veterinary clinic, the vets give it oxygen immediately.

"It's as important as it is with humans," she said.

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