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Sturbridge Fire Department gets pet resuscitation kits

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STURBRIDGE — Firefighters battle fires, but they also are called on to rescue people and their pets from burning structures.

Sturbridge fire personnel have now joined other firefighters in Massachusetts in possessing animal resuscitation kits provided by the Massachusetts Veterinary Medical Association in Marlboro. These kits are capable of saving the lives of dogs and cats overcome by smoke or suffering from cardiopulmonary arrest.

Lt. Nicholas J. DaDart of the Sturbridge Fire Department said in a recent interview that the MVMA offered the kits to the local fire crew, but the department did some research before accepting them.

"We immediately saw how easy it would be to implement this equipment in complementing the equipment that we already have," he said. "The masks (in these kits) work very much like the resuscitation equipment that we use on human beings."

He said the animal kits' masks will adapt to some of the equipment already used for humans.

Lt. DaDart said that once this adaptability was determined, it became a "no-brainer" to accept the offer of free equipment. They received two kits, a third is on the way and a subsequent anonymous offer has been made to provide as many additional kits as the department deems necessary.

According to Lt. Robert Johnson Jr., the Sturbridge department's emergency medical service coordinator, the correct-size mask is chosen based on the animal's size and weight. Oxygen is then connected to the mask via tubing, and if needed, a bag valve device can be attached to the resuscitation unit to provide respiration to an animal that is not breathing.

Lt. Johnson emphasized that the department always wants to increase its level of customer service, and these animal resuscitation kits allow the Sturbridge Fire Department to keep up-to-date on the latest kinds of care.

Lt. DaDart, the department's public information officer, underscored that this service is for rescue work related to fires. The Fire Department obviously is not an animal ambulance service and does not come to homes to revive sick animals. That is the work of a veterinarian. He said this resuscitation equipment is not on the ambulances in town, it is on the firetrucks.

"We don't want to give people the idea that they should be calling 911 for us to respond to their home for a pet," he said.

He said the Fire Department responds to pet rescues from ice situations and has done horse rescues, "so we're not against responding to help people with their animals, but we wouldn't want people whose pet stops breathing due to a medical condition thinking that was the right time to call for an emergency response."

He said the MVMA has reached out to fire departments across the state to provide this equipment. He said he is aware of the Fire Department in neighboring Southbridge successfully using this equipment to provide oxygen for animals retrieved from a fire or smoke-filled environment.

"We have not utilized the equipment ourselves as of yet," Lt. DaDart said.

The lieutenant said that unfortunately over the years firefighters here have become accustomed to seeing animals succumb to house or building fires.

"We try our best to retrieve an animal from a fire, but we haven't had a great success rate in improving the animal's condition once we retrieve it from the fire. We normally haven't had the equipment or the opportunity to intervene."

He said that now that these kits are available, the Sturbridge Fire Department is "excited" to be able to do more at fire scenes.

"Because the equipment is designed to deliver oxygen, I can't see too many other situations where it would be applicable. I've been to many motor vehicle accidents, but I haven't experienced any grave injury to a pet inside a vehicle."

Lt. DaDart also said that in situations such as motor vehicle crashes, personnel resources are limited and "we're not going to tie up a set of hands to focus on an animal if we have injured persons to deal with."

He said in all emergency situations, the needs of human beings will obviously come first. He said it is good to add a service to an organization that deals in public service.

"I'm pleased anytime that we can improve our customer service."

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