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24/7 COVERAGE ONLINE: WWW.EASTBAYTIMES.COM

One step ahead of Irma, animals flown from Florida to Bay Area shelters



Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation Executive Director Elena Bicker, center, and volunteers help unload nearly 150 dogs and cats after they arrived from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. to Hayward Executive Airport in Hayward, Calif., on Thursday, Sept. 7, 2017. ARF partnered with the East Bay SPCA and the Berkeley Humane Society to rescue the dogs from the Humane Society of Broward County which is in the path of Hurricane Irma. The animals will all be up for adoption. *(Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)*

By **GARY PETERSON** | gpeterson@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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The cold call came to ARF from Broward County at 7:30 Tuesday morning: Got room for about 150 dogs, cats, rabbits, and ferrets?

If you know ARF, you can guess the answer.

“Yes,” said Elena Bicker, executive director of Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation. “Except for the ferrets. We had to tell them they’re

illegal in California.”

Barely 48 hours later, the animals were given a police escort through hurricane evacuation traffic to the airport in Ft. Lauderdale for a one-stop flight to Hayward Executive Airport. They landed shortly after 1:30 Thursday afternoon.

It was a mission of mercy. The animals took off for the friendly skies as

Hurricane Irma, packing a potentially deadly punch, was bearing down on Florida. Landfall is expected Saturday. The Broward County shelter wanted to clear its facility before four-legged disaster victims began showing up on its doorstep.

Three Bay Area agencies — ARF, the Berkeley Humane Society, and the East Bay SPCA — prepared a warm welcome. A fleet of vans and buses were lined in a row. Two veterinarians were on hand to assess the infrequent fliers. A couple dozen

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volunteers waited anxiously. The plane? It came from Wings of Rescue, an all-volunteer, donation-financed organization that relocates animals that might be otherwise euthanized. ARF and the nonprofit GreaterGood.org paid for the flight.

The shelters divvied up the animals, which will be put up for adoption.

“A well oiled machine,” Bicker said. Seriously, if the three organizations failed to secure a copy of “The Secret Life of Pets” for an inflight movie, it was only because they ran out of time.

Sadly the collaborative efficiency came at a cost. Not only did pets die in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, people who refused to leave their pets behind died as well.

“What you’re seeing here is the fine-tuning of what we learned during Katrina,” said Allison Lindquist, president and CEO of the East Bay SPCA. “Since Katrina, it’s been mandated federally that people be allowed to shelter with their animals. We’ve also networked as organizations around the nation. We can reach out to one another and pull together during emergencies — in this case, proactively emptying a shelter in anticipation of needs.”

The animal professionals were joined by a swarm of media to await the

plane. When it finally arrived and pulled to a stop, mews and barks could be heard coming from inside. Bicker offloaded the first few crates of cats. Applause greeted the first. “Yay, kitties!” someone exclaimed.

After that the crates just kept coming. “It feels like the clown car,” someone said.

Only more organized. Each crate bore information for each occupant — name, breed, medical information. Most of the cats were classified as “domestic mix.”

The cats cared for, the bigger dog crates were removed. Most barked and whined, a caninely chorus as they rocked their crates back and forth. It

was music to Bicker’s ears, the scene a sight for sleep-deprived eyes.

“People think that ARF is this little shelter in Walnut Creek,” she said. “They don’t realize that’s just our national headquarters. We’ve deployed on national disasters. We were in Joplin (after a devastating 2011 tornado). That was our first. That’s where we cut our teeth.”

It showed Thursday. That said, this animalitarian relief effort has left all three rescue organizations needing volunteers, fosters, crates and bedding. And if you would like to take home a dog or cat that has a great story to tell, they can arrange for that as well.



A dog and her puppies look out from their crate as nearly 150 dogs and cats are unloaded after arriving from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. to Hayward Executive Airport in Hayward, Calif., on Thursday, Sept. 7, 2017. Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) partnered with the East Bay SPCA and the Berkeley Humane Society to rescue the dogs from the Humane Society of Broward County which is in the path of Hurricane Irma. The animals will all be up for adoption. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)