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Companion animals and disasters: how best can social work organisations respond?

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) has a primary focus on the needs of people affected by disaster. People, however, often form attachment bonds with animals, who live alongside humans as companions and who form part of the consideration for household response in times of disaster. Social work practice and the DRR response, however, has tended to marginalise and underplay the importance of these attachment relationships. A review of current research literature suggests that a suitable lens for considering the needs of companion animals and their families in the disaster context is a relational one which emphasises the human-animal bond. This presentation suggests that disaster planning in social work practice and organisations must therefore emphasise not only the animal rights and welfare aspects of disasters but also the human behaviour within response and recovery processes. Taking an inclusive stance that considers animals as part of the human family, this presentation explores key messages from previous disaster settings and considers the implications for disaster preparation and response within social work practice. Organisational responsibilities and the opportunities for animal-inclusive social work education are addressed.