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Pets pose particular problems for area firefighters

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Staff photo by Lindsey Gemme, Eloy firefighters (from left) Jose Quiroz and Shane Collett join Division Chief Dann Lorenz in demonstrating how the oxygen masks work on dogs Bubbles (being held by Quiroz) and Lorenz's Lab, Nell.

At many house fires that firefighters are called out to, from one to four pets are present. Some make it out alive. The event is traumatic enough for the homeowner, but some pets aren't so lucky.

One organization, HELP Inc., donates supplies that could help increase the chances of people's pets. Among the items are oxygen masks. Eloy has been the latest city to benefit.

HELP (which stands for Health, Educate, Love and Protect) Inc. is a nonprofit organization based in Orange City, Fla., and was started in July 2003. It began as a way to raise funds to assist with the cost of supplies or repairs to rescue groups and shelters that are dedicated to helping injured, abused or abandoned animals.

They also work closely with SurgiVet Inc. in New Zealand, which sells animal oxygen recovery mask sets manufactured by McCulloch Medical. There are three different-sized masks in each set that can fit any type of animal from a small bird or reptile to a cat or St. Bernard dog. These masks are donated



through funds raised by HELP Inc. to fire and rescue, EMS and K-9 units across the U.S., including Phoenix, Casa Grande and Eloy.

"It's all made possible by donations from individual citizens or organizations or groups - there's no tax dollars involved," says one of HELP's founders, Karen Clark. Some agencies and cities have even approached them and paid for the masks at the organization's cost, but they do not sell to retailers for profit. All that HELP asks for is money for shipping.

"I love when the children get involved, like the Girl and Boy Scouts," Clark adds. "They save their pennies, and some have student governments and they bring in a penny and throw it in a jar. And when it adds up, they call us. They're supplying their own neighborhoods."

The HELP organization has helped to supply whole cities with these masks, and were even approached by the NASA Kennedy Space Center in Florida, which received several sets in 2005. Delaware was the first in the U.S. to equip each station in the entire state with masks. Last week, the organization reached 5,200 donated masks throughout 47 states, including Alaska and Hawaii and several cities in Canada. The masks save a couple hundred pets nationwide every year, Clark says.

"Pets are considered family more so as every month goes by, because a lot of times people have only their pets and no other family," Clark adds. "Fire departments, on the whole, have had a very liberal policy through the years that as long as the humans are taken care of, and there is a chance to safely get the pet out, they will. And when they get the masks, within two to three weeks, there's a fire and boom! They're using the masks already."

HELP's West Coast representative, Brenda Graham, a recent transfer from New York City to Robson Ranch in Eloy, is also a K-9 dog trainer. So on top of approaching Eloy Fire Division Chief Danny Lorenz about donating the oxygen masks through HELP, Graham made sure to make a few donations of her own to the Police Department's K-9 unit.

"I called my vet and found out what my K-9 partner, Chase, would need while on patrol," K-9 officer Steve Palacios says of his 3-year-old partner. Besides the usual materials he'd need in an emergency kit like ointments, antiseptics, syringes, bandages and gauze, an important item to have on hand is epimorphine.

"Methamphetamine is such a dangerous drug. If he was alerting on that drug, and he ingested it, it's pretty much fatal. And epimorphine induces vomiting. I could go to the vet and get that, but Brenda's willing to do that for the PD and my partner, Chase. I think it's pretty cool for her to step up like that."

HELP is also responsible for funding high-cost repairs for animal shelters for things like roofing, electrical, plumbing, flooring, air and heat.

Anyone interested in contacting HELP to purchase a set of oxygen masks or other materials for a local agency, or to learn more about the organization, may visit its Web site at www.helpanimalsinc.org.

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