

# Animal masks another tool on South Shore fire rigs

By Kathryn Reed

Proper tools can save lives – even those of four legged creatures.

South Shore fire departments are now equipped with kits that have seven different masks; some deliver oxygen, some force air when an animal is unconscious. The duffle bags come with tubing and other necessities.

“A lot of pets go hide and get injured, or have smoke inhalation,” South Lake Tahoe fire engineer-paramedic Mike Mileski told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The masks are reusable. We’ll have these for many years.”

Mileski was the liaison between the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department and the donor who wants to remain anonymous. They were donated in memory of John Nemes, a longtime elementary teacher with Lake Tahoe Unified School District. Nemes was a lover of animals.



Nine pet rescue bags were donated to four South Shore fire departments in the name of John Nemes. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Each kit has a patch saying "In memory of John Nemes." SLTFD has two kits, Lake Valley Fire two, Fallen Leaf Lake Fire one, and Tahoe Douglas Fire four.

Mileski said the kits will be able to be used for a range of animals. "For small rodents you could put them in the whole mask."

If an animal is rescued from whatever the emergency is, they may be unconscious. While saving the life of a dog or cat is similar to humans in distress, it does take some training and specialized equipment.

South Lake Tahoe firefighters just received training in how to use these specialized masks for animals, what to do if a dog is choking and other tips to save a person's fur baby.

As Neil Powell, veterinarian at Blue Lake Animal Care Center said, it's important for first responders to understand the animal will be scared, and that it will want to lash out in

fear. They can't be talked to like a human to explain what is going on. That's why it's important for the firefighters to know how to protect themselves while delivering care.

Zoe Hill, a nurse at Blue Lake, demonstrated the various apparatuses, how best to position a large dog, as well as small dog or cat, and suggested ways they could use tools on the fire truck to help.



Zoe Hill and Neil Powell with Blue Lake Animal Care Center use a stuffed dog to demonstrate care in an emergency situation. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Having a large dog's back to the person is key to avoid being lashed out at when the animal comes to. It can be easier to

hold a small dog or cat. If a towel or blanket is nearby it's a good idea to put a cat on it so its claws can be wrapped up for protection.

"You need to make sure the head is extended so they have an air way," Hill told the firefighters. "I'd do mouth to snout on a big dog." Sweeping the animal's mouth for obstructions is a good idea, just like with humans.

When using the air bag a tight seal is mandatory to be effective.

It doesn't matter which side the animal is on for compressions. It's near impossible to break a cat's ribs, and is only a real concern in dogs 13 and older because theirs are more brittle.

"If they are unresponsive, do CPR," Powell advised. But he said after 10 minutes saving the animal is not likely to happen.

With smoke inhalation, the animal's airway swells, which is why it is difficult for them to breath.

Hill talked about how IV tubing or a leash can become a muzzle of sorts. She stressed not putting a hand or head under a table to retrieve an animal fleeing a fire or some other emergency because that is likely to result in a human injury. Instead, she suggested making a lasso out of leash or other device and coaxing the animal into it.

Getting the animal to a veterinarian as soon as possible is the best course of action.

Battalion Chief Karl Koeppen recalled how when a dog was hit he got into his vehicle and took it to Powell.

That can't always happen depending on the emergency.

If an owner is not available to authorize veterinary care,

then at least in California it is the county animal control officer who may grant permission. Animal control is supposed to be available 24/7. An animal hospital is not always available after hours on the South Shore, but they all have a recording suggesting where to go.

Statistics provided to the firefighters from Blue Lake Animal Care said that 40,000 pets die in house fires in the United States each year, with another half million affected by the event.