



Contact: Brian Wierima, GCHS Community Relations Coordinator

Phone: 239-332-0364 ext. 319

Email: communityrelations@gulfcoasthumanesociety.org

Website: www.gulfcoasthumanesociety.org

**For Immediate Release

Distemper on the rise in U.S. after hurricanes

GCHS being proactive after confirmed cases

FORT MYERS, Fla. – The Gulf Coast Humane Society is going through what every shelter in the country dreads – confirmed cases of Canine Distemper.

GCHS has been a leading shelter in herd health over the years, but with the rise of Canine Distemper in the U.S., the disease has found its way to the shelter.

“Distemper is a serious infectious disease and we have been following every protocol to make sure our shelter animals are safe and healthy,” said GCHS executive director Jennifer Galloway. “We are committed to practicing the best and safest protocols to keep all of our shelter animals safe.”

Canine Distemper is a virus which is contracted through airbourne exposure, such as coughing and sneezing, or by touching another surface which was exposed by an infected animal. What makes canine distemper so dangerous is the animal can start shedding the virus seven days before symptoms start showing.

Symptoms include pus-like discharge from the eyes, nasal discharge, fever, coughing, lethargy, reduced appetite and vomiting. Distemper is often fatal.

The virus attacks the animal’s respiratory, gastrointestinal and nervous systems, the latter causing seizures, muscle twitches, convulsions with jaw chewing movements and/or partial or complete paralysis.

The Distemper cases resulted after GCHS helped out other shelters affected by Hurricane Florence, which hit North Carolina. Out of the five dogs GCHS took in from these shelters, two ultimately were infected with Canine Distemper.

The dogs which were brought into GCHS, had their two vaccinations and were titer tested. GCHS is currently being advised by the University of Florida's Maddie's Shelter Medicine program.

Dr. Cynda Crawford of the University of Florida, is an infectious disease expert and is helping layout a plan to make GCHS Distemper free. It will be a tireless process, but one which needs to be followed to a "T", Galloway said.

"I commend GCHS for partnering with shelters impacted by the recent hurricanes to offer their dogs a safe haven," Dr. Crawford said. "Unfortunately, such good deeds come with risk for bringing in a contagious disease, despite best efforts to reduce this risk. GCHS is committed to supporting the full recovery of the distemper-infected dogs so they have that second chance at life the shelter promised when they took them in. I hope the community rallies around them, specifically in adopting the dogs when they are ready."

GCHS has been proactive in keeping the community informed about all the diseases which have been exasperated by the slew of hurricanes, starting with Irma. The shelter requires potential adopters who come in and do meet and greets with dogs to initial and sign a worksheet on common shelter diseases and illnesses. The GCHS shelter manager has consistently been in contact via email with adopters to warn them of symptoms of infectious diseases such as parvo, ringworm and Canine or Feline Distemper – all of which have risen in the U.S. due to the hurricanes.

"GCHS follows American Veterinary Medical Association shelter medicine guidelines," Galloway said. "Our shelter is always getting compliments on how clean it is and we always have, and will, maintain those high standards of good herd health."

The only solution to prevent Distemper is vaccinating all of your animals. All potential adopters will need to have vaccinations records of all their pets before adopting from GCHS.

"Vaccinating your pets is the only way to eliminate the spread of Distemper," Galloway said. "Our protocols at GCHS are far above the normal standard, as well. These are threats every shelter in America has to deal with sometime or another and we are doing what is needed to do to for a healthy shelter."

Here are some facts to know about Distemper:

- Distemper does not spread to humans.
- The Canine Distemper does not infect cats or kittens.
- The Distemper vaccine which pet owners are highly recommended to get for their animals, is very effective in preventing the disease. GCHS vaccinates all their shelter animals, as well.
- Distemper is very hard to detect in its early stages, since it can shed for up to seven days before symptoms start to show. But the disease is treatable if diagnosed at an appropriate time.

There also have been financial strains the shelter has been under due to more aggressive cleaning and trying to contain the Distemper virus. Items such as cleaning supplies, medical supplies and preventative

measures like disposable gloves, booties and gowns are being used at a much faster rate than normal, thus meaning much higher costs.

“Now, more than ever, we need our supporters’ help and donations,” Galloway said. “These are costs we are not normally accruing and being a non-profit organization, those add up.”

To help and donate, visit <http://www.gulfcoasthumanesociety.org>.

ABOUT THE GULF COAST HUMANE SOCIETY

Gulf Coast Humane Society, located at 2010 Arcadia Street in Fort Myers, was established as the first non-profit animal welfare organization in Southwest Florida in 1947. The 501 (c)(3) mission is to rescue, provide safe refuge and compassionate care, and find forever homes for abandoned and neglected animals in the area. GCHS only takes in owner surrendered and transfers from other shelters and rescue groups with a high success rate of adoptions. Their Veterinary Clinic offers a full array of affordable services six days a week and the Spay/Neuter clinic is open four days a week. Both services are open to the public.

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