

Do the Firemen Need a Fire Before They Come to Your Barn?

by Gary Slate, New York State Horse Council, Central Region Vice President

If you are a horse owner suffering through this extreme cold and snow, wouldn't you take some comfort in knowing that if your barn roof collapses, or there is a fire, or some other emergency, that the volunteer firemen who show up to help you have some experience with livestock? With the current generation moving off the farm and into the suburbs, and the national trend of fewer young people volunteering at local fire departments, fewer farm kids are on your local fire department, and that troubles many of the rural, suburban, and even urban fire companies. In Northern Onondaga County, Mark Burger of the Brewerton Fire Department was able to get some members from the fire companies of Brewerton, Constantia, Caughdenoy, and Jamesville to come together on a Sunday morning this past February 8, 2015, for a joint training session. The plan for the day was for these active volunteers to visit two horse farms in full response gear, and train firemen to handle horses, and for the horses to be handled by firemen.

Mark Burger's day job is to manage the Onondaga County Soil and Water Conservation District, and over the past few years, he and his staff have helped arrange two Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue (TLAER) training sessions on the NYS Fairgrounds in Syracuse, conducted by Dr. Rebecca Giminez from Georgia. These sessions have trained horse owners, veterinarians, firemen, and rescue professionals, how to work in emergency situations with livestock. One of the key lessons has always been for the people to return to their home areas and pass on what they have learned to their local fire and rescue teams. Some fire departments, with small staff and limited resources, are reluctant to stretch their resources any thinner, and even say that they seldom or never are called on to handle livestock. Mark has pointed out to many local departments that the NYS Thruway and Route 81 go through their department's area of responsibility, and that livestock trailers on these expressways alone present a daily potential for accidents, as well as horse and dairy facilities in their district and in neighboring districts.

As it happened, a few weeks before this training session, members from a local fire department were called to help rescue a horse trapped in a swimming pool. They did manage to save the horse, but they realized that they could have been better prepared with equipment and some training with the equipment they did have. The Sunday morning training was not a response to this rescue, but rather had been years in works. Since participating in three TLAER training sessions, he took the initiative to prepare notes and resources to present a very basic training session, and was excited when his chief recently asked how soon he could offer training for his fire company.

How do you get people to show up on a Sunday morning in the middle of a long cold winter, on a day that held no hope of warmer temperatures? Volunteer firemen make a large commitment in time and training sessions, and are required to complete a

minimum number of hours on a regular basis. At any given time, there are a number of men and women who need training hours to keep their standing, so Mark was assured that there would be a fair number present that day. They were not coerced, however, but honest students who had no more than average exposure to horses and livestock.

The first stop was a small private barn and indoor ring combination. The three horses were an ideal mix for the training session: a 2 year old with minimum handling, a mature 12 year old with lots of handling, and a 20 some senior who was bomb proof. The combined departments brought some of their rescue and hose trucks, and had initial training in how to approach the barn, determine where equipment needed to be for various scenarios, and how to park out of the way so the rescue could proceed efficiently. The barn manager gave a brief talk on her horses, how to work the halters, and then let the firemen in full rescue gear go through the steps of opening stall doors, approaching and haltering horses, and leading them into the indoor arena for safety.

The firemen offered thoughts to the barn manager about some things in the barn that could improve safety or make a rescue easier. Ginny Wickham Brown, a horse trainer who helped Mark communicate with barn owners, shared a story about a friend who had lost horses in a barn fire years earlier, and the firemen at that fire had said that the horses were “locked in their stalls, and couldn’t be rescued”. The sad truth was that there are many types of stall door fasteners, and if you find one you haven’t seen before, you might assume it was locked. The firemen were encouraged to try the stall doors, and learn how they work. The point of the story was that experience and training can prepare you for this type of frustration, and that sometimes you need to learn as you go. The next barn they visited had entirely different stall door fixtures, so this one lesson was very useful.

The second barn was a much larger facility, a public stable with boarders, as well a dressage training facility with a very large covered open riding arena. The main aisle was rather luxurious, showing the firemen that horse people come in many different income levels. They learned how to work entirely different style doors. The greater number of stall doors caused one fireman to comment that in their typical building evacuation, they would check stall by stall. He suggested having numbers on stall doors, placed low to the floor, since in a smokey burning building the firemen would be crouching or on their knees. They could then use the numbers to keep track of vacated stalls. They were impressed with the friendliness of the barn owners, although they showed the same level of commitment to saving lives and property here as they did at the first barn. Horse people are sometimes surprised to learn that the priorities of firemen at a rescue is to save human life first, then property, and then livestock. The firemen at this training session learned that some horse people would rather they put the horse before the barn.

You might be thinking that you would like to have your local fire department come to your barn for a training session like this. Don’t be discouraged if they tell you no. Most fire chiefs will agree to send someone or come themselves to assess your barn for

safety. They may point out changes you could make so their trucks could come onto your property. They may ask you to dig out fire hydrants from the snow so they can be used. They might ask about nearby sources of water. They could look over your barn and point out fire hazards and even praise you for some of the good things you have already done. You could make sure they know how to open your stall doors, and where you keep your halters. But to get a group out to handle your horses, and get your horses used to fire masks and helmets, you might have to find a fire department that shares your passion for large animal emergency rescue. But for the sake of your horses, keep on asking!