

Study finds Florida needs more pet-friendly shelters

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Rachel Douglas, a doctoral candidate in FSU's sociology department and the lead author on the paper. Credit: Bruce Palmer

Florida needs more pet-friendly shelters, especially for older adults who represent 50 to 75 percent of deaths following disasters like hurricanes,

according to a recent study from Florida State University.

A multidisciplinary team of FSU researchers examined the most densely populated area of Florida, Miami-Dade County. The study, published in the *Journal of Gerontology*, found that Miami-Dade is not fully equipped to handle the sheltering of pets during an emergency, an issue that may exacerbate other obstacles to [evacuation](#) faced by older adults.

"We know that older adults are a vulnerable population, especially when it comes to evacuation preparedness," said Rachel Douglas, a doctoral candidate in FSU's sociology department and the lead author on the paper. "They have heightened risks when it comes to hurricanes and other major natural disasters, which is why we chose to look at this particular population."

In fact, of the 67 counties in Florida—the state with the oldest population and greatest hurricane susceptibility—39 have no plan in place for pets and the remaining 28 offer relatively few pet-friendly hurricane evacuation shelters.

Researchers used a two-pronged approach to examine the availability of pet-friendly emergency shelters and older adults' need for them.

First, researchers from the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering identified the shortest paths to pet-friendly shelters for the older population. They found many older adults resided in the outskirts of Miami-Dade, where access to pet-friendly shelters was limited and the nearest American Red Cross-approved shelter was nearly 20 miles away.

"Our interdisciplinary research clearly provides evidence of a mismatch between pet-friendly shelter availability and need in the Miami-Dade area, particularly among pet owners lacking financial resources and older adults living at farther distances from shelters," said Eren Erman

Ozguven, co-researcher and assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering at the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering.

In addition to proximity, researchers examined older adults' anticipated need for pet-friendly shelters using data collected through the 2013 American Housing Survey's Disaster Planning Module. They found that among people 65 and older, 34 percent reported having pets—and 35 percent of that group anticipated they would need help evacuating.

Pet owners were 60 percent less likely to anticipate the use of a shelter. However, the opposite held true for pet owners who reported they would need help evacuating their pets—they anticipated using shelters.

"The engineers drew our attention to the geographic and structural impediments to evacuation," said Anne Barrett, co-researcher and director of the Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy. "As sociologists, we drew their attention to the social and economic contexts shaping evacuation plans. This synthesis led to a more nuanced picture of older adults' evacuation during emergencies."

The team said qualitative interviews from respondents would enhance future research—understanding the reasons why people choose to evacuate or [shelter](#) in place would provide more context to the bigger picture than quantitative data reveals.

"Our research can be used by agencies to adjust their emergency plans and improvise solutions to serve the needs of [older adults](#) with pets," Ozguven said.

More information: Rachel Douglas et al, Evacuating People and Their Pets: Older Floridians' Need for and Proximity to Pet-Friendly Shelters, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbx119](#)

Provided by Florida State University

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