

Large Animal 911

LCEA Bringing Emergency Horse Rescue Training To The Region

By David Gignilliat

On November 11, 2019, both the Loudoun County Sheriff's Department and the Purcellville Police Department responded to an emergency animal rescue incident on eastbound Route 7, near Hillsboro, Virginia. A driver towing a horse trailer with a pickup truck had his rig's receiver separate from the truck's two-inch ball, causing the trailer to sway erratically. The trailer's rear doors burst open, ejecting the animals out of the moving trailer. The driver ran off the right side of the road, up an embankment, struck several trees, and the truck flipped onto its roof. Somehow, the horses remained upright, and after 30 minutes, the two passengers were rescued from the trapped vehicle. Meanwhile, a second accident happened in the westbound lane of Route 7, closing both sides of the road. Over 11 emergency and law enforcement vehicles responded to the scene. Officers wrangled the horses to safety and rescued the passengers from the vehicle. According to the police summary, the horses "were transported from the scene, virtually unscathed."

A positive, safe outcome for all involved. **But could it have been different?**

With large animals, it is inevitable that accidents and emergencies will happen, especially with over 15,000 horses in Loudoun County, and over 130 horse-related events in the greater Northern Virginia region each year. And, often, there is very little time for first responders to develop effective and safe solutions, especially under the weight of high-stakes emergency scenarios.

The Loudoun County Equine Alliance (LCEA) is coordinating its first-ever Large Animal 911 – Large Animal Emergency Rescue Training. This is a three-day training course August 29-31, 2020 for first responders, veterinarians, and horse owners in Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue (TLAER) training, to be held at the Loudoun County Fairgrounds in Leesburg, Va.

"A lot of [first responders], they have no experience with large animals," said Janet Vandervaart, who sits on the LCEA's Board of Directors. "And in Loudoun County, you're living in an area with a really dense population of livestock and horses that are both highly valued and much loved."

Training will explore the practical considerations, behavioral understanding, specialty equipment, tactics, techniques, and methodologies behind the safe extrication of a live large animal from entrapments (trailer wrecks, ditches, mud, water, barn fires) in local emergencies. The course will be divided into Awareness (classroom environment) and Operational (hands-on problem solving) sections, requiring participants to demonstrate competency in new techniques before receiving certification.

"It's extremely interactive ... This course is not as much about animal behavior as it is about changing human behavior and attitudes," said Dr. Rebecca Husted, the course's presenter and an internationally-acclaimed TLAER expert. "[It] forces first responders to admit that they really don't know how to deal with these problems of having a frantic owner, a 1,000-pound panicky (and valuable) animal that doesn't understand what and why they're there, a veterinarian that doesn't know how to plug into incident command, all while trying to form a team to solve one of the most complicated puzzles they've ever encountered."

Vandervaart agreed.

"The horses know. The minute a horse senses someone doesn't know what they're doing, they're not going to stand there nicely," echoed Vandervaart. "It's really crucial to have training when you're in an emergency situation"

PHOTOS COURTESY: DR. REBECCA HUSTED



Using a horse mannequin, Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue (TLAER) expert Dr. Rebecca Husted teaches various head-handling techniques to a veterinarian from Brazil and a firefighter.

The LCEA was founded in 2012, to bring together the vast equine community in Loudoun County. The local horse industry contributes over \$180 million annually to the county's robust economy. It is a community likely to keep growing in both size and economic impact.

"We're like a business Chamber for the horse community, so anything we can do to help that community, we try to do," said Dr. Kelly Foltman, LCEA president.

"The ultimate goal is to offer this training, and then assist in purchasing some necessary equipment. Ultimately, we will encourage the formation of a local Loudoun team that can respond to these sorts of emergencies now that they've been trained," added Foltman.

The Loudoun equine community currently relies heavily on the support of the Little Fork TLAER, based out of Rixeyville, Va. The Little Fork team will travel as far as Loudoun County if needed, but response times would be greatly reduced by having a team based in Loudoun, and available to surrounding counties as well.

LCEA received a large sponsorship from the Virginia Horse Industry Board (VHIB) to fund much of the training. VHIB promotes economic opportunities for the horse industry in Virginia. But more sponsors are needed for funding.

"For anybody who works in the equine industry, this is a great opportunity for them to sponsor something for which they could be the beneficiary" said Foltman. "It's a real opportunity for all involved. Among our [equine] circles, this training has created quite a buzz. This type of training doesn't come around very often."



TLAER trainees learn how to handle trailer accidents, barn fires, animals stuck in water and mud, and other emergency situations involving horses.