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## A breath of fresh air

By Staci Dennis *Correspondent*

### VIRGINIA BEACH

With smoke and flames consuming the house in Strawbridge, neighbors rushed outside to tell firefighters that three pets were trapped inside.

"The firefighters conducted our search patterns just like they would have if there had been a person trapped in there," said Gary Brittingham, a master firefighter at the Plaza station 16. "One dog ran straight out and we found the two other animals inside."

Two dogs and a lizard survived, thanks to the work of the fire crew, and the dogs recovered quickly with the help of a pet oxygen mask outfitted on the firetruck.

Firefighters from Courthouse Engine 5 and Strawbridge Ladder 21 were able to cup the mask around the dogs' snouts with a device made just for animals.

"Animals seem to respond well to concentrated oxygen," said Brittingham, a firefighter for more than 20 years. "When we have the equipment that fits their needs, then our efforts are more effective."

Thanks to the combined efforts of **Animal Rescue of Tidewater**, the Animal Welfare Coalition of Hampton Roads and Friends of Virginia Beach Animal Control, along with Brittingham and animal advocate Stephanie Scott, enough money was raised to buy 60 kits and outfit each firetruck in Virginia Beach.

"This is a great addition to the life-saving equipment already in place with the fire department," said Debra Griggs, founder of **Animal Rescue of Tidewater**. "Without the right equipment, the firefighters couldn't respond in the best way possible."

The project started in early 2007 when members of **Animal Rescue of Tidewater** linked up with Brittingham and shared information on pet oxygen masks being placed in fire/rescue units throughout the country.

"I knew we wouldn't have the budget to just go buy the masks," Brittingham said. "I wanted to do something to involve the community."

The \$70 kits, which were in place on the trucks by March, contain three sizes of masks. In addition, 30 bags were screen-printed to hold the kits so they are kept in a safe, accessible place. The three animal care groups provided funding for the bags.

Within two weeks of being placed on the trucks, the oxygen masks used in the Strawbridge fire.

"We have always treated animals in the past, but we had to use the oxygen masks made for humans," Brittingham said.

"That just doesn't work well for an animal. Now we have the means to treat almost anything - human or animal."

The pet oxygen masks fit not only dogs and cats, but also work on lizards and birds, Brittingham said.

Area civic leagues jumped on board and helped provide kits to the Chesapeake Beach Fire Station and the Haygood Fire Station. Owl Creek Veterinary Hospital donated proceeds from its "Pictures with Santa" program, which provided six kits that were placed throughout the city.

The Virginia Beach SPCA donated enough money to buy 10 additional kits to outfit Virginia Beach rescue squad vehicles in the highest run areas. In addition, the Green Run Homeowners Association donated funds to buy nine kits, and their offer was matched by the Witchduck Civic League in order to outfit more rescue squad vehicles.

Chesapeake already has the pet oxygen masks. Griggs said she hopes the idea catches on and other cities will do the same.

"Our next goal is to equip the trucks in Norfolk," she said. "I think all fire and rescue trucks should have these life-saving masks."

For more information about the pet oxygen masks, visit [vbfdpets.homestead.com](http://vbfdpets.homestead.com) or [artanimals.org](http://artanimals.org).

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