Baton Rouge -- Residents forced from their homes by the threat of a storm will be able to drop off their pets at an emergency evacuation center that should be open for the 2008 hurricane season at a state medium security prison north of Baton Rouge.

The Humane Society of the United States announced Monday that it will donate $600,000 to Dixon Correctional Institution in the East Feliciana Parish town of Jackson to build an emergency animal evacuation center and veterinarian clinic on the prison's grounds.

Humane Society President Wayne Pacelle, flanked by officials of Dixon and the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine, which will help staff the facility, made the announcement at a news conference on the steps of the state Capitol.

The money will finance the construction and equipping of the emergency evacuation center for 300 to 500 animals with room to expand.

David Senior, the vet school's associate dean for advancement and strategic initiatives, said when the facility is not being used as an emergency evacuation center, it will operate as a clinic for stray animals picked up in the Baton Rouge area.

Senior said the facility will help train vet students who will work with licensed veterinarians in treating, spaying and neutering strays.

Dixon Warden Jimmy LeBlanc said Gov. Kathleen Blanco has authorized the use of inmate labor to build the center, thereby saving money. LeBlanc said construction should start within the next 45 days and should be finished in March or April.

"The pet population has become a higher priority" since the hurricanes, LeBlanc said.

Pacelle said trained inmates, selected on a best-conduct basis, will care for the evacuated animals.

"Hurricanes Katrina and Rita reshaped the dialog on how to deal with the evacuation of animals" during a disaster, Pacelle said. In many cases during the 2005 storms, rescuers would not take individuals who wanted their pets to accompany them, and some people declined to be rescued if it meant they would be separated from their pets.
"It was a wake-up call" for state and federal officials, Pacelle said.

Senior said about 2,000 pets were cared for during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita at the Parker Agriculture Center on the LSU campus, and another 5,000 to 6,000 were cared for at the Lamar Dixon Center in Gonzales. In all, more than 10,000 animals were rescued during the two storms and many had to be shipped out of state to animal shelters.

LeBlanc said the care of animals will be incorporated into the rehabilitation program at Dixon. After an inmate training program is set up, LeBlanc said inmates will be involved in training dogs "to take care of special needs populations," such as seeing-eye dogs for the blind and pets as companions for the elderly.

Senior said the new facility, within 25 miles of the LSU vet school, will give student vets a greater opportunity to practice shelter medicine in non-emergency times. The facility will have a fully-equipped surgical suite to care for animals and help control the animal population in the Baton Rouge area, where an estimated 8,000 animals have to be destroyed each year.

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Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or (225) 342-5810.