

Training First Responders on Equine Handling and Technical Rescue

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Emergency responders may have little training in equine behavior, and the instinctive reactions of the horse can quickly make emergency situations more perilous. A pilot survey in Northern Virginia revealed that while over 60% of first responders had attended emergencies involving horses, less than 25% had training handling horses. Two programs were developed. In each, topics were presented as lectures and followed by hands-on practice with live animals. A basic program was designed to educate first responders on equine behavior, handling, and first aid. An advanced program included detailed rescue techniques and practice with specialized equipment. Surveys were administered during each program and assessed previous horse handling experience and comfort level, and knowledge gained during the program. In the basic course, 82% reported no horse handling training prior to the program and 30% had never owned horses. Over 78% reported learning “a lot” about topics covered. While 15% were “not comfortable” handling horses before the program, none held this view after the training. Comfort level handling horses increased in 94% of participants. After the advanced program, 67% had gained “a lot” of knowledge on techniques and equipment options. Confidence levels again shifted upward: 65% were more comfortable handling horses and 94% would be more comfortable directing an emergency scene involving large animals. Single and multi-day training programs appear to be effective at increasing knowledge of equine behavior, first-aid, and appropriate rescue methods, and at improving the comfort level and confidence of emergency responders handling horses.

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