Some years ago I was in Holland. During my trip, I saw a newspaper write up on an animal ambulance group and went to see them. A few people got together about eight years ago and pooled in their funds to create a trust for an animal ambulance. It has oxygen, a first aid kit, stretchers, bird cages, a small sink, rolls of paper, blankets, catching sticks, a net, muzzles, rubber gloves and a register. They advertised this van as a door to door service - to take the animals to the elderly to the vets, to rescue abandoned animals, to arrive for emergencies, to save wild birds...anything that has to do with animals either "owned" or "God's own" (their two categories). The group has now expanded to four ambulances and works only with volunteers - mainly retired people who would like to be useful to society, young professionals who want to do some voluntary work, animal lovers. They take anyone under 18 and college students very rarely. The volunteers are paid bus fare only and each volunteer is trained for one month by vets and rescue experts. During the training period, the new recruit goes out on missions with experienced volunteers. If at the end of the training month, the recruit is unsatisfactory, he / she are not taken. There are 12 hour shifts of night and day, from six to six. Four people at a time man the four phones and eight go as drivers and handlers to the spot. There is a small room on the side which has a bunk bed and clean sheets so that an exceptionally sleepy volunteer can nod off for a bit. The group works out of a rented building that has a telephone room and gives 24 hour service. The basement of this rented flat is used as a training classroom. There are huge storage rooms for all the equipment and medicines necessary for first aid and rescue.

The local authorities of Amsterdam have recognised the ambulance group and they are paid by the fire department or by any civic department if they help rescue animals during emergencies. They work with the police department a lot. When the police get reports of an animal being abused by an owner (I get virtually one a day in Delhi. It is a cognisable offence in India so, provided you have learnt the section of the PCA Act you can report it and have the owner arrested) they confiscate the animal and ask the ambulance service to pick it up and take it to a shelter. For those animals that have owners they charge a small fee (35 guilders). They also have programmes that are even cheaper. You pay once a year and that entitles you to 24 trips to the vet free. If the animal is wild or abandoned, the service is free. The ambulance picks up the animal, takes it to a vet, has it treated and then deposits it in a suitable sanctuary -- dogs go to the dog shelters, cats to the cat shelters, birds to the bird shelters, sheep, horses and cows to their shelters, etc. There are more than a dozen such shelters in the city.

The group is tied in with all the vets of Amsterdam. When they pick up an animal, they telephone the vet from the van itself, no matter what time of night it is, and take the animal in for medication. The animal is either left overnight at the vet's or kept at the Ambulance Home (When I went, there was a seabird that had been brought in. It had deep red blood coming in slow drips from its mouth. The volunteers took it to the bird doctor but it had to be put to sleep because it had massive internal bleeding). In fact, a few years ago, the Amsterdam vets got so

fed up of being woken up so often at night by the ambulance service, which has on an average of 30 calls a day, mainly at night (even in my hospital the distress calls are usually after 10 p.m. from people who have seen an animal lying on the road the whole day) that (no, they did not refuse to work, only Indian vets do that) they got together and have put up a combined polyclinic that operates in the evenings where one or two vets do night duty and save everybody else the bother. If the animals belong to a person, the vets charge. If it doesn't, the vets of Amsterdam all give their time and medication free (The vets of Delhi charged for every animal I brought in).

The upkeep of the ambulance service is expensive, as are the rent and maintenance of the building, the telephones, the bus fares, the petrol and medicines. The group runs a small monthly magazine called Dieren Ambulance which gets ads. They are sometimes left money in people's wills, they sell T-shirts and small knick-knacks on the road or at melas, they have charity donation boxes. They make enough money to run the operation -- and every now and then someone donates another van.

It would be so simple for a group of people to start a similar operation in any city. If a businessman could donate an ambulance -- I have all the details of the fittings -- a dedicated older group, of say housewives or retired people, could take over that animal management of an entire town like Indore or Surat or Baroda or Pune or Bangalore, for instance. This Amsterdam ambulance group has been imitated in virtually all the towns of Holland and each one now has its own rescue service which means that the country is blanketed with helpers of both wild and domestic animals. In our country, we have such few services for so many millions of animals. Even if one wants to start an ambulance service as a professional money-earning service - doing charity work as a small part - it would still be a welcome step.

Maneka Gandhi