

A Patchwork of Food Assistance for Pets

By CARLA BARANAUCKAS

ANIMAL shelters have reported a steep rise in the number of cats and dogs being surrendered as owners face unemployment, home foreclosures, evictions and other financial hardships. But animal welfare groups and even churches are stepping up with bags of kibble and containers of cat litter to help owners keep their pets and to prevent more from being sent to shelters, and sometimes death.

No national network coordinates pet food assistance. Instead, efforts have sprung up at a grass-roots level as individuals and groups have recognized the problem. The means of offering aid to pet owners varies with each organization. The Humane Society of the United States keeps a long list of programs on its Web site headlined "Having Trouble Affording Your Pet?" And the society acknowledges that there are probably many more programs the organization is not aware of.

The Tree House Humane Society in Chicago, which focuses on cats, has provided food assistance for more than 30 years, said Ollie Davidson, the society's programs manager.

The society, which also provides food for dogs, has seen demand almost double over the last year, giving out more than 44,000 pounds of pet food this year, Mr. Davidson said. About 20 percent of the food distributed was for dogs and about 80 percent for cats. If current trends continue, the organization expects the number of those receiving pet food assistance to grow to 200 next year, from 157.

"Most of our food is coming from donations of people," Mr. Davidson said, but with the sharp increase in demand the organization is applying for grants to help cover the costs.

Mr. Davidson said the grant applications emphasize that the food aid program is about much more than feeding hungry animals. "We're helping people," he said. "In times of stress, it's always good to keep people with their pets."

Jennifer Fulton, president of the Northland Pet Food Pantry in Kansas City, Mo., said the de-

The donations may be for animals, but the gifts also help ease the burden for owners.

mand was huge. "We started giving out food in May of this year, and the response has been incredible," she said. "We had people feeding their pets before they were feeding themselves." But now 155 families with pets are being helped.

PAWS Chicago, a no-kill animal shelter, started a crisis-care program and a food bank last year, "when we saw the whole real estate thing happening and people were losing their homes," said Paula Fasseas, who founded the organization in 1997. The organization provides temporary foster care for pet owners who are struggling because of the economy. In addition, the shelter has worked with the Petco Foundation, providing dog or cat food and litter for up to three months, said Rochelle Michalek, executive director of the shelter.

Sandra Jauga, a maintenance worker in Chi-



A LITTLE HELP Koatha Gorden of Kansas City, Mo., with donated food for his dog, Cooper.

cago who said she had been out of work since falling off a ladder this year, turned to PAWS Chicago for help when her workers' compensation claim was denied. Ms. Jauga, a single mother of four, said Roxy, her beagle-pit bull, would not be able to eat without the aid. "I'm really grateful for the help," she said. "If you have to get rid of the dog, what's going to happen with the dog? Where is it going to go?"

With a mission of making Chicago a no-kill city, the shelter visits Chicago's animal pounds regularly to rescue animals that have not been reclaimed or adopted. By providing pet food to people facing financial hardship, the organization is trying to keep more animals from being surrendered to the pounds.

For its part, the Petco Foundation has been involved with pet-food banks since it began in 1999, said Paul Jolly, the executive director. "We have always been involved in the food bank concept simply because it keeps people with their animals."

Mr. Jolly said that Hurricane Katrina was a drastic lesson for the country about how strong the bond between people and their pets can be. "Katrina pointed out that pets are part of the family, too," he said.

The Petco Foundation, based in San Diego, has partnerships for pet-food assistance with about 75 organizations across the country. In January, the foundation is introducing a program with Feeding America, a hunger-relief charity whose members supply food to more than 25 million Americans each year.

Under the program, "We Are Families Too," 750 Petco stores will have bins where customers can donate pet food, Mr. Jolly said. In addition, the



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WHERE'S MINE? Red waits for a treat from an outreach specialist at his home in Kansas City.



DONATION Gloria Harris, pet outreach program manager at Spay and Neuter Kansas City, which collected 12,000 pounds in a recent drive.

foundation will supplement the donations with food from Petco and other vendors. Distributors will often donate food approaching its expiration date.

Help is also available from tiny, grass-roots organizations in smaller towns.

The Young at Heart pet rescue of Palatine, Ill., which focuses on finding homes for cats and dogs over age 5, established Nina's Pet Food Pantry with a donation from Steve and Laurie Weiner of Buffalo Grove, Ill., in memory of their Portuguese water dog, Nina. The pantry collects donated kibble from individuals and pet-food distributors, mixes the various brands and types of food and repackages it in plastic zip-top bags for distribution at two human food banks, said Karen Ortolano, a spokeswoman for the organization. (Combining the food assures a uniform quality and makes it easier for the animal to make the transition to what the group calls its "rescue mix.")

After Nina died about a year ago, Mr. Weiner said he could understand the pain of separating from a family pet. "I'm thrilled that dozens of pets

don't know how close they came to having their lives changed," he said, adding that a relationship with a pet is a 24/7 commitment for the life of the pet. "You don't move away from them or they don't go off to college," he said. His family continues to help with the pantry program, staying involved in the rebagging of the food. "Just last week I was knee-deep in pet food with latex gloves on, sifting and sorting," he said.

Some of the food-pantry programs encourage or even require pet owners to spay or neuter their pets. Spay and Neuter Kansas City is one group that makes pet altering a requirement. Gloria Harris, pet outreach program manager, said the organization provides low-cost spaying and neutering services for low-income pet owners. If there is not enough money to feed a pet, there probably is not enough for a litter of puppies or kittens, she said.

In October, the organization held its "doggy food raiser," collecting 12,000 pounds of the 20,000 pounds of food it will distribute this year, Ms. Harris said.

Part of the campaign was tied to the Kansas City Chiefs-Philadelphia Eagles National Football League game this season. Fans were asked to pledge a bag of dog food every time the Chiefs sacked Philadelphia's quarterback, Michael Vick. Although the quarterback was sacked only once, 500 pounds of food was collected.

But the pet-food banks are not simply the work of animal welfare groups. Northeast Community Lutheran Church in the urban core of Minneapolis serves about 300 people a month at its Little Kitchen Food Shelf, ac-

ording to its Web site. But the church, which also provides vaccines for companion animals, found that people struggling financially also needed food for their pets. Now people are also offered food for their pets.

"We know that pets being dropped off at humane societies tend to be on the rise in this current economy, so it's obvious that pets are suffering," said the Rev. Craig Pederson, the pastor.

Jennifer Schultz, coordinator of the Little Kitchen, said she knew the demand was great because the church had received calls from people who live in the suburbs and needed help feeding pets.

Dwayne Pough, a Chicago cook who has been out of work for several months, said help from PAWS Chicago made a big difference for his American Staffordshire, Malachi. "Man, it was crucial because he's a big dog and he eats a lot," Mr. Pough said. "I get food stamps, and you can't buy dog food with food stamps. Actually, I was down to my last bag with maybe two more feedings when they came through. It was a life-saver, really."