

# ANIMAL Sheltering

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The Magazine for Animal Care Professionals and Volunteers



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Difficult Dogs

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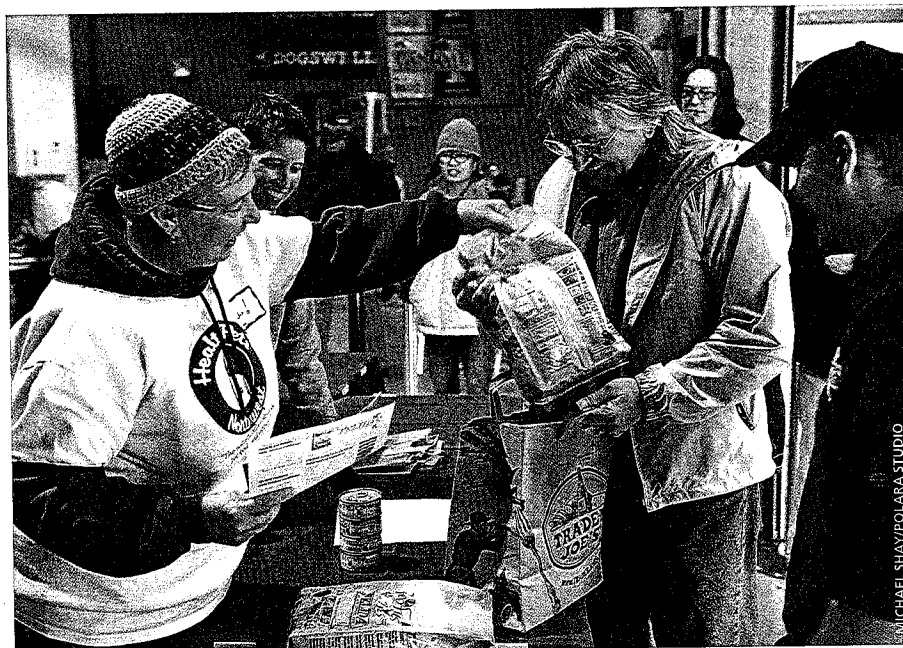


THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES

# Banking on Generosity to Feed Hungry Animals

In hard times, pet food pantries supply a lifeline

BY JAMES HETTINGER



Volunteer Julie Cantowine, left, helps distribute food to a guest at The Pongo Fund Pet Food Bank in downtown Portland, Ore. Also on hand are Laura Amiton, second from left, of the pet foods retailer Healthy Pets Northwest; and Jon Tingle, right, regional manager for Canidae Pet Foods.

The hard economic times continue to make it difficult for some families to put food on the table ... or in their animals' bowls.

To help, dozens of shelters and nonprofit organizations around the country have established pet food banks—providing free food to ease pet owners' financial burdens and maybe keep family companions in their homes.

"You guys are a lifesaver," Donna Messner of Hagerstown, Md., tells food bank volunteers as she picks up a bag of cat food at the twice-monthly pet food bank run by the Humane Society of Washington County. An owner of nine cats, she's part of a steady stream of financially challenged people coming to the humane society's back parking lot on a cold, cloudy December morning for bags of food and litter that volunteers are fetching from two large trucks.

Walking to her car, Messner explains, "With the way the economy is, they've made

it so I can keep my cats." She says she can't find work, and her husband is on disability. "Sometimes it's hard just to keep us in food."

The scene is being repeated in nearly every corner of the nation, from a warehouse in downtown Portland, Ore., to a van in Colorado Springs, Colo., and a pet food pantry at a shelter for people in York County, Maine.

The food banks vary widely in size, scope, and operating methods. They get pallets of food donated from stores and corporations, and single bags from kind-hearted individuals. Some require proof that their clients reside in a particular jurisdiction and receive government assistance; others will serve whoever shows up. Some serve individuals only, while others also provide help to small shelters and rescue groups. But they all report that they're tapping a real and growing need in their communities, and keeping busy largely because of the bad economy.

## Animal Sheltering Online

Your magazine isn't just in print—it's on the Web, too. Check out this issue's online extras.

- More answers to this issue's Coffee Break question are at [animalsheltering.org/coffeebreak](http://animalsheltering.org/coffeebreak).
- Go to [animalsheltering.org/mouthpieces](http://animalsheltering.org/mouthpieces) to download a poster promoting adoption of smaller shelter pets, such as hamsters, rabbits, mice, etc.
- Read lesson plans for teaching basic commands to shelter dogs at [animalsheltering.org/partners/lessons](http://animalsheltering.org/partners/lessons).

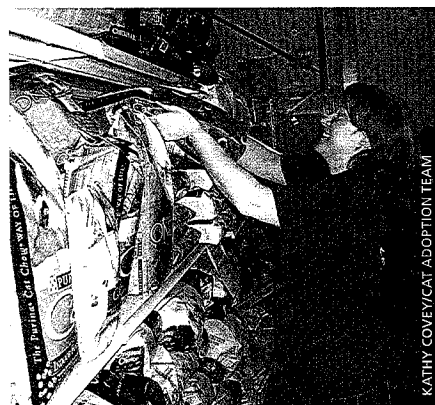
"Here in Oregon, the [economic] climate is pretty poor, which means that our cat food bank is a huge success," says Kathy Covey, public relations manager for the Cat Adoption Team (CAT), a felines-only shelter outside Portland that has operated a monthly pet food bank since June 2008. CAT distributed 375 pounds of food in its first month, but by September 2009 it was giving out nearly 2,500 pounds—an increase of more than 500 percent. By November, CAT had provided area cat owners with a total of 22,399 pounds of kitten and cat food. Covey says the numbers have left the CAT staff "just floored."

CAT's food bank, staffed by about 10 volunteers, operates from noon to 2 p.m. on the first Sunday of each month. In the summer, Covey says people begin lining up as early as 8:30 a.m., and a few walk roughly a half mile from the nearest bus stop.

When the food bank first began, Covey cautioned her volunteers against making snap judgments: The person driving up in a nice car, for example, might have bought it before he got laid off. Clients fill out an application form that asks if they're receiving financial as-



Marie Wampler, left, a volunteer at the Humane Society of Washington County's food bank in Maryland, chats with Donna Messner of Hagerstown, Md., who says the food she receives from the program has enabled her to keep her nine cats.



The Cat Adoption Team, a felines-only shelter in Sherwood, Ore., saw an increase of more than 500 percent in the volume of food it distributes to cat owners in financial need. Here, Connie Snow, volunteer leader for the food bank, pulls a bag off a shelf in the organization's warehouse.

sistance, but Covey says for now no proof is required; she's convinced that no one is "trying to get free food just to get free food."

Families can get a month's supply of food for up to four cats, and are allowed to use the food bank for five consecutive months before being asked to take two months off. "We're a temporary fix," Covey explains.

Owners of cats who aren't spayed or neutered are directed to CAT's subsidized program and asked to get the operation done within a few months, Covey says, "because we don't want to feed a breeder."

### Family Matters

Several pet food bank organizers say their programs aim to keep animals in the home and out of the shelter at a time when families—facing everything from home foreclosures to rising veterinary bills—might consider giving up their pets.

"We're just trying to keep the families together during this time," says Christine Wiersema, development director for the Idaho Humane Society, which began a pet food pantry in fall 2008 amid reports of families relinquishing their pets because of economic struggles, and even some seniors feeding their Meals on Wheels meals to their pets. The pantry, which distributed about 18 tons of food in its first year, now partners with the local Meals on Wheels program to provide food for 200 seniors' pets.

Wiersema says the food pantry—with 57 collection bins throughout the region, mostly at veterinarians' offices and pet supply stores—has prompted the shelter to do "a little out-of-the-box thinking." The bins are relatively expensive, so the shelter recoups some of the cost by having individuals or organizations sponsor a bin year-round for a \$50 donation.

Some families refuse to give up their animals, no matter how dire their economic circumstances. "We were gearing to the anecdotal situation that people would surrender their animals as times got tough, and I think really what's happened is people have hunkered down with their animals," says Steven Jacobsen, executive director of the Animal Welfare Society in West Kennebunk, Maine. "So what's happened is people have done everything they can to retain their animals, but obviously need some help to do so."

Free food takes some of the economic pressure off the family, possibly preventing animals from becoming a "scapegoat," perceived as siphoning money from the family's other needs, Jacobsen explains.

### Giving and Getting

Michele LaVerdiere, a longtime supporter of Jacobsen's shelter, began a program in September 2008 that enables people to donate pet food or money at about eight businesses in the Kennebunk area. The donations are transported to the York County Shelter Programs' Food Pantry, a food bank for humans that also serves as the distribution point for LaVerdiere's pet food pantry. The pet food pantry distributes about 150 to 200 pounds of food per week, and has left LaVerdiere marveling at people's generosity. "When it comes to giving for children and pets," she says, "people are amazingly generous."

Larry Chusid, founder and executive director of The Pongo Fund Pet Food Bank, which operates from a warehouse in downtown Portland, Ore., says he is dumbstruck by the donations of high-quality food his program has received from manufacturers Canidae and Dogswell. "It's more than great. It's necessary," Chusid says. "It's a lifeline to a community that desperately needs a lifeline."

Chusid doesn't envision his program ending anytime soon. "The need in the community is always going to be there," he says, "regardless of what the economy is."

Despite the occasional grumpy recipient, food bank operators say on the whole their clients are extremely grateful for the helping hand. "We've gotten hugs, we've gotten 'God bless you,' we've gotten all sorts of things," says Darlene McCaslin, founder and president of the Pikes Peak Pet Pantry in Colorado Springs, Colo., a nonprofit that distributes food twice a week from a van parked at a sponsoring business.

Back at the Humane Society of Washington County parking lot in Hagerstown, volunteer Jane Kline suspects a higher power might be at work. "I feel blessed that I'm able to help," she says, "and that the food is here to be given." 