

Food Banks Assisting Needy Cat Owners

Donations helping to feed pets during tough economic times.

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Jim Gardner, with two other volunteers, helps collect pet food for South County Outreach in Lake Forest, Calif. Getting into financial trouble shouldn't force pet owners to give up their animal companions, which is why Dr. Jim Gardner started collecting donated pet food for a Southern California food bank.

If people can't afford to feed themselves, he said, then chances are they're struggling to provide for their pets, too. So he started dropping off pet food donations at the South County Outreach food pantry in Lake Forest.

That way, the people who go seek food for themselves can also take some for their pets. "If you're in trouble, more than ever you're in need of a pet," said Gardner, a licensed animal rehabilitation specialist.

Similar projects have launched across the United States to help needy pet owners. (Click [here](#) to see a state-by-state list of pet food banks.) The primary goal of these pet food drives: to help slow the number of animals entering the shelter system.

"Not that it's a complete solution, but it would certainly help if people could feed their pets," Gardner said. He and his wife, Anne, have been collecting pet food for the past seven months for South County Outreach.

Although the food pantry's focus is to feed people, the demand for pet food has grown from 100 pounds a week to 500 pounds a week, Gardner said. The largest donation was one for 900 cases of dog biscuits.

Donations consist mainly of dog and cat food, as well as some bird food. On occasion, people donate checks.

Food banks that cater specifically to pets, such as the newly opened Kibble Konnection in Grand Rapids, Mich., are also working to help pet owners on tight budgets. Dog and cat food makes up for most donations, however, resources are also available to help owners of hamsters, rabbits, reptiles and even horses.

The Pet Food Bank, established in 1997, has supplied more than 50 animal rescues in Southern California and Mexico with pet food donated by manufacturers and retailers. Donations range from dog and cat kibble to food for more exotic pets.

The Meals on Wheels Association of America, which provides food delivery services for senior citizens, also runs a program for pets. We All Love Our Pets, or WALOP, was created in partnership with Banfield Charitable Trust to help low-income seniors keep their pets nourished and healthy.

Working to get pet food to owners in need ensures that the animals are able to stay with their caretakers, instead of being abandoned, Gardner said. He plans to keep his pet food drive going for the next year or two as pet owners ride out the economic downturn.

"Eventually good times will return," he said.