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Pet Talk: Need for pet food banks is up in down economy

By **Sharon L. Peters**, Special for USA TODAY

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Sometimes, a few bags of free dog or cat food and a little time is all it takes to make giving up one's pets unnecessary.



Pet Talk

By **Sharon L. Peters**

By Vance Jacobs for USA TODAY

Not every pet has all he can eat. More and more pet pantries are springing up, and a growing number of shelters are working to find ways to give free food to pet owners in need.

That was the thinking behind the pet food banks that sprang up like oases in the desert when the economy went sour a few years back. The folks who started those operations were rewarded with tales of people, who — laid off from their jobs, down to their last few dollars and on the brink of leaving their pets at a shelter — received some free kibble and days later found work and could pay the rent and keep their pets.

That's how things are supposed to turn out.

Not every hard-times story ends that way, of course.

And, there's another, significant chapter of the pet food bank chronicle that hasn't played out exactly as hoped. The happy-ending dream these pet food pantry originators shared was that in a year or two the economy would right itself, the matter of millions of pets surrendered or abandoned for financial reasons would be mostly a dim, awful memory, and food banks would no longer be necessary.

In fact, the situation has worsened. The number of animals landing at shelters and rescues has escalated, and, of course, so have euthanasia rates, as welfare groups struggle to take in and feed the crush of animals.

So more and more pet pantries are springing up (or are attempting to spring up); a growing number of shelters are working to find ways to temporarily give free food to pet owners who are in dire financial straits and are moments away from turning in their pets; and food pantries for humans are sometimes stocking pet food as well.

All that still isn't enough.

Most pet pantry founders are working harder and longer, and in ways they hadn't anticipated.

One of them is Ann King. She launched the non-profit [Save Our Pets Food Bank](#) in Atlanta in 2008, horrified by stories of down-on-their-luck owners making excruciating decisions about their animals. Within months, pet owners were arriving in droves to collect the food she had managed to secure through individual donations, pet food companies and every other means she could divine.

King thought that the need would be fleeting and that soon she could return to her job full-time.

Now she has abandoned her previous life as a small-business owner, living on "what I'd put away in earlier



AP

Millions of pets have been abandoned or taken to shelters for financial reasons. The situation is burdening shelters, and isn't getting any better.

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years." She spends hours a week locating and making transport arrangements and storing and distributing thousands of pounds of pet food. Her group distributes hundreds of pounds of food a month to walk-up owners in need of help — "it's so bad here that euthanasia rates are up 46% this year over last." But in addition, SOPFB is getting food to overburdened underfunded rescue groups without the funds to feed the influx of animals that are being dropped off or that they're trying to save from high-kill shelters.

And though King — who learned the mechanics of pet pantry establishment simply by doing it — has put step-by-step instructions on her website for people who want to launch their own local pet pantries, she regularly travels to far-away communities to assist start-ups encountering roadblocks.

"Many people out there imagine the pet crisis has passed," she says. "It most certainly has not. It was dire before, and it has gotten worse."

Bark at us

Sharon L. Peters is an award-winning pet journalist who lives in Colorado. E-mail her at pets@usatoday.com.

Indeed, an alliance, called Rescue Bank, has now been formed (King is a member) so like minds can brainstorm, strategize and figure out how to get more pet food — primarily from pet food manufacturers who regularly dump soon-to-expire or re-branded food — to more places more often. They've set up 25 distribution partners in several states to receive, inventory and redistribute the food, and their goal is to select and train up to 100 partners in the next two years.

In just five months, more than 500 non-profit animal welfare and social service agencies have received pet food, and King predicts as many as 750 will be receiving food and supplies by year's end.

They're all doing what they can, King and those like her. But the problem is so much bigger than most of us realize, and they've been able to make only a small dent so far.

Still, it's comforting, somehow, to know that even in the face of an economy that continues to be so strained, and so many problems piling up on the national plate, there are people who are paying attention and working day and night to make a difference for animals.

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Eyeguy

Score: -14

7:03 PM on September 27, 2011

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Your Life: Health

How sad. With so many people suffering, resources are being spent on ANIMALS. These folks need to get a grip on reality. Their priorities are out of whack.

Just think what might happen if they spent their time and/or money at a local grade school or soup kitchen.

 1 reply



[GOPrTraitors](#)

Score: 7

8:47 PM on September 27, 2011

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But dogs are loyal..and humans not so much



[vicpgh](#)

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9:57 PM on September 27, 2011

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I wish USAT would not run these types of stories due to people like Eyeguy. Very few humans these days are worthy of compassion. Dogs and cats - just plain easier to love.



[rushred9](#)

Score: 6

11:43 PM on September 27, 2011

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When I lived in Atlanta and in the process of losing my home in 2003, I was so desperate for food for my girls. I didn't qualify for assistance for myself. (I DON'T want to get into that... as most would find my reasoning unsavory), but the local Forsyth County shelter sure helped us (the dogs) out.

Now in Florida (and things are worse for us down here. My dogs have been living in a local shelter for the past 2 years as unemployment has left us destitute)

The shelter where my girls are living help people out who are down on their luck. (Though some take advantage of their generosity). Since the shelter is full up w/ no vacancies, we would rather help out as to have to take animals in. (Tho we do and find room for them)

If folks would help their local shelter with bags of food, you have no idea how much you are giving.

Just a thought.



[JosephLCooke](#)

Score: 6

7:56 AM on September 28, 2011

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Swing by WalMart and buy a 50lb bag of 'Ol Roy dog food for ten bucks. Deliver it to a shelter. You'll be a better human for it.



[teofix](#)

Score: -1

11:17 AM on September 28, 2011

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Eyeguy

7:03 PM on September 27, 2011

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How sad. With so many people suffering, resources are being spent on ANIMALS. These folks need to get a grip on reality. Their priorities are out of whack.

Just think what might happen if they spent their time and/or money at a local grade school or soup kitchen.

+++++

What an @SS. How do you know they DON'T spend their time and money helping humans also? Are you going to tell that little girl at that elementary school she has to give away her cat because only humans should be given food? People often need spiritual aid too and quite often that is their pets.



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