

Sam's Hope provides help for needy pet owners

Huizhong Wu, *Inquirer Staff Writer*

Posted: Friday, March 13, 2015, 1:08 AM



Liz Hendley has \$17 left after paying all of her bills each month.

That's barely enough for a week's worth of groceries for herself, much less for her two dogs, Shadow and Chichi.

"If it wasn't for Marianne, I couldn't keep up with them," the 79-year-old Warminster woman said.

Marianne Iaquinto is the founder of Sam's Hope, a nonprofit that donates pet food, treats, toys, anything a pet would need, to low-income people in Philadelphia and Bucks and Montgomery Counties.

In the last 19 months, Sam's Hope, named in memory of a dog Iaquinto used to have, has distributed more than 67,000 pounds of pet food through a combination of home deliveries and partnerships with food pantries and nonprofits that assist seniors. It also has partnered with local veterinarians to provide free checkups and other medical services.

The group, which works out of a storage facility on Jacksonville Road in Warminster, depends on a mix of donations and grants to help Hendley and other people on a tight budget. Its aim is not to replace all of a pet owner's expenses, but to supplement them, Iaquinto said late last month.

It wasn't always difficult for Hendley to keep her dogs well fed.

About five years ago, when she was working as a caretaker for a child with ADHD and receiving a regular paycheck, it was fairly easy for her to keep Shadow, her 8-year-old black Labrador, in biscuits and kibble.

But after she stopped working four or five years ago and started to live exclusively on Social Security and food stamps, she found it difficult to keep up. On top of that, Shadow developed health problems. Hendley needs to buy food designed for overweight dogs, which is usually more expensive. Shadow also requires expensive trips to the vet.

She was already feeling pinched when Chichi, a 2-year-old terrier, joined her family.

But since Sam's Hope stepped in a year ago, Hendley's dogs have been eating well and healthy. In fact, she has a sweatshirt that reads: "My dog eats better than me."

"If it wasn't for Marianne, I'd be up a creek without a paddle," Hendley said.

Iaquinto - a 57-year-old former vice president of a company that provides child identification and safety education programs - was moved to establish Sam's Hope after learning of the rising number of pet surrenders beginning with the recession of 2008. She developed a simple goal: keeping animals out of shelters.

By February 2013, she had incorporated Sam's Hope as a nonprofit dedicated to helping the poor keep their pets.

Five months later, she was in business. After juggling Sam's Hope and her official job for a few months, she left her full-time position as vice president to focus on Sam's Hope. All of her time to Sam's Hope - about 50 hours a week - is donated.

Now, her efforts include collecting donations, running food deliveries to homebound seniors, and helping provide veterinary care for ailing dogs and cats.

Iaquinto measures the program's success by the number of pets she helps.

As of this year, Sam's Hope has made food available to more than 3,000 pets, and has provided veterinary services to 52 pets.

Its newest program, delivering pet food to homebound seniors, feeds 50 pets. Iaquinto hopes to expand that number to 250 by the end of the year.

The group operates on a yearly budget of \$65,000 and a group of 10 volunteers who use their own vehicles. For bigger deliveries, Iaquinto gets help from U-Haul and Nonstop Couriers.

Nationally, approximately 2.7 million animals are euthanized each year, according to the American SPCA. This is about 35 percent of the 7.6 million animals that enter shelters.

It is not set in stone that an animal will be euthanized once it is surrendered to a shelter, said Pennsylvania SPCA chief executive Jerry Buckley. PSPCA is a no-kill shelter. Its live release rate, which measures the number of animals that leave their shelter, is 95 percent to 97 percent each year.

It is the risk of pets being put down that drives Sam's Hope. Many of the owners of modest means, Iaquinto said, would rather cut from their own budgets than give up their pets to the shelter.

"If they can't provide food for their animal, they'd be forced to give them away," said April McKnight of Jesus Focus Ministry Food in Southampton, Bucks County. Her organization is one of the agencies that delivers pet food for Sam's Hope.

Often, the pets are also the only companions people have.

Barbara Garcia, a Chester County resident who received vet care for her cat, Palomo, through Sam's Hope, said that the group was a "godsend."

"I'm all by myself. I'm 60 and I don't have any family. My family is my cats," Garcia said.