

Pet-food delivery is a lifeline for homebound seniors and their animal companions

by [Mari A. Schaefer](#), Updated: March 15, 2020- 5:00 AM



MONICA HERNDON / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

How much do elderly pet owners love their animals? So much so that some of them, when they're financially struggling, will set aside their own needs rather than allow their beloved pets to go without the basics.

"They won't buy medications, they feed their [own] food to their pets," said Marianne Iaquinto, founder of [Sam's Hope](#), a meals-on-wheels-style nonprofit that delivers free pet food to low-income pet owners so they won't have to choose between feeding themselves and feeding their four-legged friends. The service is one of several in the area that seek to address an awful reality:

According to a 2015 study in the [Open Journal of Animal Sciences](#), about 1.2 million pets are surrendered each year, with about 73% either given to family or friends or relinquished to a shelter. About one-third of the pet owners with incomes less than \$50,000 surveyed said access to free or low-cost pet food would have helped keep the pet in the home. Another 40% said help with veterinary costs would've done the same.

The heartbreaking result is that too many much-wanted animals are euthanized — and their owners are denied the companionship of a cherished companion. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, owning a pet helps decrease feelings of loneliness and depression and can increase opportunities for socialization and fitness.

So many of Sam's Hope clients are "homebound and isolated," said Iaquinto, who founded the agency in honor of her "once-in-a-lifetime" dog, Samantha, who died in 2012. The charity serves seniors in Bucks, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties who are in need of nutritional and veterinary assistance for their dogs and cats.

Located inside a former military facility in Warminster, the shelves in the nonprofit's tiny office overflow with large bags of animal chow, treats, and — for cats — litter. Volunteers break down and repackage the goodies into smaller parcels, which are then distributed to area pet-food pantries, designated human-food cupboards, or a second Sam's Hope location for pickup. For about 320 Sam's Hope clients unable to travel, the charity will deliver the food directly. All told, last year more than 60,000 pounds of kibble and cans went to the needy.



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Sam's Hope provides each client a two-month supply of food. While it's intended to supplement a pet's diet, for some animals — whose owners live on less than \$1,000 per month — it's their only source of nutrition.

Clients of Sam's Hope must be referred to the agency by a social-services agency. Frequent referrals come from the [KleinLife](#) community resource center in Northeast Philadelphia.

"The ones we work with are all homebound," said KleinLife's Ellen Rosenzweig, an in-home support program case manager. "We have people who are living for their animals. They rely on them for companionship and love."

Other groups in the Delaware Valley also offer pet-food assistance to low-income pet owners (though not all deliver), including the [Providence Animal Center](#) in Media, founded in 2010, which provides supplies to the Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry in Prospect Park. And three senior centers in Phoenixville, West Chester, and Coatesville participate in a pet-food assistance program through [Henry's Helping Paws](#), cofounded last year by State Sen. Andy Dinniman and the Pennsylvania Veterinary Foundation.

"We were the pilot program," said Julie Gaudan, executive director of the Phoenixville Area Senior Center, where Henry's Helping Paws helps about 20 low-income seniors feed their pets.



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On a recent day, Sam's Hope volunteers Pat Vertlieb and Diane Suzuki (along with their dogs) joined Iaquinto at the Sam's Hope Warminster facility to portion out allotments of cat and dog food. Any kibble that hit the ground was immediately gobbled up by Spike, Vertlieb's Chihuahua-pug mix.

"All orders are made specific to the needs of the client and [the weight of] their animal," said Vertlieb, and clients must accept the food that is offered — requests for specific food brands cannot be accommodated.

Among the 25 Sam's Hope volunteers are 18 delivery people, including Leslie Woods.

"I've had a longstanding love of dogs, and [volunteering] is an extension of that," said Woods, 62, who lives in Roxborough and has also volunteered at shelters and rescues. Every two months, she pops into her blue Chevy Cruise and delivers pet food to homes in the Tacony section of Philadelphia.

"I feel like, on some level, I'm preventing some animals from having to be surrendered," Woods said.

"That is the upside to me."

During her January delivery to the home of retired jazz musician and author Eugene Rizzo, 79, Woods was greeted by his dog Simone, who spun around the living room in excitement. It wasn't until Woods let the dog into the spacious backyard that the pup calmed down.



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“That’s a good girl, that’s a good girl,” Rizzo said, as the 35-pound mutt flopped on her back for belly rubs.

Simone came into Rizzo’s life when a visiting nurse asked if he would adopt the dog, whose former owner was no longer able to care for her. The Sam’s Hope food delivery, Rizzo said, made it possible for him to answer “yes.”



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Simone, who barks at any knock or outside noise, gives Rizzo a feeling of comfort in a rough neighborhood, said Rizzo. But even more, she gives him companionship.

"I just like being around animals," he said.

At Woods' next stop, a rowhouse a few blocks away, a snack-obsessed Chihuahua named Tray was waiting at the door when Woods arrived.

"He is a very, very, very, good dog," said Tray's owner, Milton Young, 70, as he ripped open a new treat bag. "And he likes his snacks."

Young, a retired meter reader for Philadelphia Gas Works, is diabetic. Without help from Sam's Hope, he said, it would be hard for him to provide quality food to Tray. In the past, he was shopping at the dollar store and occasionally sharing his own food with Tray, which put his own health at risk.

"I don't like to give him table scraps," Young said.