

Sam's Hope: A shining light for pets in need

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by June Portnoy

Every year an estimated eight million animals nationwide enter shelters. Nearly 50% never find homes and are euthanized. About six to eight percent of pets surrendered are due to a pet owner's financial inability to care for them.

Citing these statistics, Marianne Iaquinto explains why she established Sam's Hope, based in Richboro, one year ago.

"I read how so many shelters are suddenly overflowing since the economy has been adversely affected, and I wanted to do something to help," says Marianne, who has always been an animal lover.

"When money is tight, and you have to choose between feeding your family, paying your utility bills or caring for your pets, your pets become your last priority, which is why so many of them end up in shelters."

Paying for pet food or basic vet care sometimes becomes a luxury many pet owners can no longer afford. Since food stamps only pay for people food, some pet owners end up sharing their food with their pets, compromising their own health.

As a result, Marianne set out to help save the lives of companion pets by founding Sam's Hope, a 501 (c)3 non-profit organization. Its goal is to keep those individuals facing economic and health challenges and their pets together by providing pet food and veterinary care assistance.

She named her organization in honor of her Shih Tzu, Sam, who passed away in May 2012. "My hope is that all pets can live as Sam did, in a loving, forever home with uncompromised care," says Marianne.

Sam's Hope started operations in July 2013. Marianne, who was very passionate about this cause, gave up her full-time job to devote all her attention to her newfound organization. Her first task consisted of setting up pet food collection boxes around Lower and Central Bucks County.

Soon after, Marianne approached the Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC), which operates 27 food pantries throughout the county to see if they had a need for pet food at any of their pantries.

BCOC expressed an interest in this type of support, and as a result, Sam's Hope currently distributes pet food to the Emergency Food Pantry at Jesus Focus Ministry in Southampton, Harvest Ministries Food Pantry at Cornwells UMC Church in Bensalem and Coordinating Council of Health and Welfare Emergency Food Cupboard in Warminster.

In addition to these Bucks County pantries, Sam's Hope also provides pet food to several locations in Northeast Philadelphia. Pet food is also distributed to eligible individuals who live outside these distribution areas, but who contact Sam's Hope.

This organization delivers pet food every other week. “Not all food is from collection boxes,” adds Marianne. “We also reach out to retailers, some of whom have been very receptive to donating pet food to us.”

Sam’s Hope is already making a positive difference to the lives of many cats and dogs. From July 1st, 2013 through February 28th, 2014, Sam’s Hope distributed 14,000 pounds of pet food, helping to feed 1,500 plus pets. Within the same time period, Sam’s Hope awarded 14 grants to help ten dogs and four cats receive vet care.

Marianne adds, “So far this year, we have already awarded four vet grants, with four pending. These grants provide exams, routine tests, medications, vaccinations and preventive care.

Marianne’s goal for the upcoming year is to distribute pet food to three additional food pantries and to focus more attention on providing assistance to low-income, senior pet owners. In order for Sam’s Hope to continue to grow and serve more pets, it is in need of donations, sponsors and volunteers.

Sam’s Hope is currently looking for a volunteer with a truck or van to pick up large pet food donations. If you would like to volunteer or host a pet food drive at your school, business or supermarket, contact Sam’s Hope.

And, of course, if you’re in need of pet food or medical assistance for your four-legged companion, simply complete an application on-line at www.samshope.org. This application must demonstrate your need based on income, disability or public assistance.

For additional information about how you can help people in need remain with their beloved pets, call 267-753-0510, or visit www.samshope.org. Sam’s Hope offers assistance to pets in Bucks and Montgomery counties, as well as those living in Philadelphia.