

Keeping pets out of shelters

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The recession may be winding down, but those who were hardest hit are still dealing with the fallout. Included among that fallout are thousands of companion animals.

Most cities in the United States don't keep track, but pet abandonment and shelter admission numbers have risen in recent years. In the United Kingdom, where they do keep such statistics, animal abandonment is up by more than 58 percent since 2008, according to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Struggling pet owners often have no choice but to surrender their beloved animals to a shelter because they can no longer afford to feed them.

But there is a great way to allow families to keep their companion animals. A food pantry aimed at pets, not people, can help needy owners bridge the financial gap.

Approximately 5 million to 7 million companion animals entered animal shelters nationwide this year, and approximately 3 million to 4 million were euthanized, according to the ASPCA.

While we don't know of any pet-food-specific shelters in Burlington County, there are food pantries catering to pet owners in the region. But they need your help to continue their good work. Making a monetary or pet food donation to one of these pet food banks will keep a dog or cat out of a shelter and in a home where it is loved.

A Ewing, Mercer County, couple operates the Pet Food Pantry out of their home (www.thepetfoodpantry.org). In its first year of operation, the pantry supplied nearly a ton of food for local animals, including five parrots and a duck.

New Jersey Aid for Animals in Winslow, Camden County, (www.njafa.org) offers a pet enrichment program that provides food assistance and can help cover the costs of a flea treatment or dog house for pet owners in need. Brimm's Chowhound House in Camden is a food bank for domestic animals and is run by students attending Brimm Medical Arts High School (www.chowhoundhouse.com). The Kibble Cupboard (www.KibbleCupboard.org) in Egg Harbor City helps seniors, low-income families, the disabled and the homeless keep their pets. A number of veterinarians' offices and pet-related businesses, such as Carriage House Dog Grooming and Doggie Day Care in Erma, Cape May County (609-898-3661), have food and supplies for families in need or will refer pet parents to a pet food pantry that can assist them.

Also, many local food banks, including the Food Bank of South Jersey (www.foodbanksj.org), accept donations of pet food.

Our pets offer us support and comfort in difficult times. Don't deny others that same joy and peace of mind. A parent shouldn't have to surrender his child's best friend because the family is temporarily having trouble keeping up with the expenses of caring for a pet. Seniors shouldn't have to give away a trusted companion because they're struggling financially.

Keep another pet from ending up in an overcrowded shelter. Consider making a donation of pet food and supplies to a New Jersey food bank or pet food pantry.

The PET AID Team of the American Red Cross of Burlington County is holding a holiday pet food drive through Saturday. Visit www.burlingtoncountypetaid.org for donation drop-off locations.

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