

Paws and Effect: Providing Homeless Pet Owners with Animal Food

Genevieve Frederick founded Pets of the Homeless to offer animals the food their owners can't provide.


By Penny Musco

Unexpected Journey

When Genevieve Frederick visited New York City in 2005 to receive an award for her self-published book, *Happy Tails: Hilarious Helpful Hints for Dog Owners*, a homeless man and his dog on the sidewalk caught her attention. "I wanted to give him money for dog food," says the avowed animal lover, "but sadly, I was too afraid." Back home in Carson City, Nevada, Genevieve couldn't get the pair out of her mind. How could someone who wasn't able to shelter himself take care of an animal? Her research revealed that in some cities, up to 5 percent of the unsheltered homeless population have pets.




Animal Control

Genevieve, then 58 and retired from a full-time career in marketing and promotion, felt others were better equipped to tackle homelessness. But Genevieve thought she might be able to ease the circumstances of those with pets. She bounced an idea off her book's co-author, a veterinarian: What if the public could bring pet food to his practice for the local food bank to distribute to needy people and their animals? A year later she founded Pets of the Homeless, initially soliciting donations through a website. By 2008 she had nonprofit status. "The recession was in full swing and people started seeing more homeless with pets," Genevieve says. "We gave them a way to help without putting them in an uncomfortable situation." Her friend's vet clinic became the first collection site, joined by places like [commercial banks](#) , hair salons and medical offices. Now there are more than 400 distribution locations, in food banks and soup kitchens in just about every state. Over 340 tons of food has gone to tens of thousands of animals (usually dogs, with a smattering of cats and even birds).

Creature Comfort

Such an incredible bond exists between the homeless and their pets that they often take better care of their animals than themselves. "A pet is the only thing a homeless person has left," she explains. "They've lost their identities; they've lost any material possessions except what's in a shopping cart or on their backs. Animals give them solace." Often, they shun shelters and social services if their pets aren't welcome, and they're frequently wary of seeking health care for their pets for fear the animals will be confiscated. But Genevieve worked out the solutions to those problems too. The organization offers collapsible sleeping crates to shelters so four-legged companions can safely remain with their owners. And it assists volunteers in partnering with area veterinarians, who provide emergency care, exams and vaccinations. Also, because the organization doesn't give money directly to the homeless, it hands out vouchers for free spaying or neutering when it sponsors wellness clinics.

Group Project

At the Nevada headquarters, Genevieve and three part-time salaried workers keep busy with grant writing, recruiting distribution and collection venues, and fielding calls for assistance. Her daughter, Renee Lowry, 41, who's been with Pets of the Homeless from the beginning, is now the paid [executive director](#) . Genevieve's grandchildren -- ages 15, 12 and 8 -- also contribute by stuffing envelopes and separating pet food into small zippered plastic bags (so owners don't have to carry large quantities). Genevieve realizes she's not tackling the bigger issue of homelessness but still wants to do her little part. "If we can help the homeless keep their pets, that's just one less heartbreak for them," she says. "And one less dog that ends up in a shelter."

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