

Pet owners can get a boost in tough times

Written by Sara Cobble

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ACTion Programs for Animals (APA)

MISSION: Help people and their pets live better lives together. APA's vision is that programs and services will help transform the community to improve the quality of life for companion animals and greatly reduce the number of abandoned and homeless animals impounded and killed at the municipal shelter.

LOCATION: P.O. Box 125, Las Cruces, N.M., 88004

INFORMATION: (575) 644-0505, actionprogramsforanimals.org, or e-mail actionprogramsforanimals@yahoo.com

FUNDRAISING: Donations can be made online at actionprogramsforanimals.org or can be mailed to P.O. Box 125, Las Cruces, N.M. 88004. APA also accepts donations of used vehicles and heavy equipment, pet food and other items. Visit actionprogramsforanimals.org/donatevolunteer for a list of places in Las Cruces to drop off material and monetary donations. You can also donate to APA by shopping with a Community Partners card at Albertson's.

Donations for the pet food bank can be dropped off at the following locations:

The Bean of Mesilla, 2011 Avenida de Mesilla

Better Life Pet Foods, 365 Avenida de Mesilla

Calista Animal Hospital, 1889 Calle de Niños

Horse N' Hound, 991 W. Amador Ave.

Las Cruces Toyota, 935 S. Valley Drive

Mesilla Valley Pet Resort, 2500 W. Amador Ave.

Mountain View Market, 1300 El Paseo Road

Pet's Barn, 1600 S. Valley Drive

PetCo, 3050 E. Lohman Ave.

Toucan Market, 1701 E. University Ave.

Money donation jars:

American Classifieds, 580 S. Valley Drive, #100

Animal Hospital of Las Cruces, 3171 N. Main St.

Barnett's Harley Davidson, I-10 at Avenida de Mesilla

Beloved Pets, 403 S. Melendres St.

Calista Animal Hospital, 1889 Calle de Niños

High Desert Machines LLC, 2321 Westgate Ct., Unit B

Las Cruces Toyota, 935 S. Valley Drive

Mesilla Valley Feeds, 1800 W. Amador Ave.

The Bean of Mesilla, 2011 Avenida de Mesilla

VOLUNTEERING: APA has many volunteer opportunities. Visit their website to download a volunteer application form or call or e-mail the above phone number and address for more information.



Richard Davis photo

Michel Meunier, executive director of ACTION Programs for Animals, loads up a plastic bag for John Smerek, Doña Ana County resident who has one dog. The local nonprofit agency holds weekly free pet food distributions for struggling owners in Doña Ana County.

People in Las Cruces aren't the only ones hurting from tough economic times — the city's pets are feeling it too.

While some of us are struggling to make ends meet, expensive dog and cat food can add to an already burdened grocery list, especially if someone has more pets than they can afford.

This is where ACTION Programs for Animals comes in, a local nonprofit agency that holds weekly free pet food distributions for struggling owners.

The opportunity to have and keep a pet as part of the family is a chance that everyone should be able to have, even living on fixed incomes, said Michel Meunier, APA's volunteer president and founder.

"We believe people should have that... it's not a luxury. They're their family members and they should be able to keep them," she said. "We should help them afford them."

Meunier said some of the clients they help are also people who are trying to do their part in the community by taking stray animals and reducing the burden on local animal shelters, but sometimes they end up with more pets than their budgets allow for.

"You see that a lot of people are trying to do their part, but in many instances, they take on too many animals that they can't afford," Meunier said. "Not everyone that has more than their allotted number of pets are hoarders. They don't w

take them to the shelter. We don't want to take these animals and dump them on the shelter, and we're trying to do the best to take care of them and not do that."

Paying it forward

APA began when the group was given a large donation of food in March 2009 by a man who had all of the 100-plus guests at his St. Patrick's Day party donate a bag of food, Meunier said. APA's board members came from several other animal welfare groups in Las Cruces, including the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico and the Spay and Neuter Action Program. After that large donation, they pursued their nonprofit 501c3 incorporation, and after getting organized they put on their first food distribution in June of that year.

Since that first distribution, APA has given 89,000 pounds of pet food to more than 475 pet owners and guardians in the community, at a rate of 4,000 to 6,000 pounds per month. Food used to be distributed monthly, Meunier said, but it is now distributed every weekend. To receive food, guardians must call APA and fill out an application to provide proof of their income and need. APA purchases pet food through community donations, and there are several locations around town where community members can drop off food or cash donations. APA also donates pet food to Casa de Peregrinos, an emergency food bank, and the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope.

The idea of "paying it forward" is built into APA's philosophy, Meunier said — anyone who receives food must spay or neuter their pets to continue to receive it, to help mitigate the problem of pet overpopulation in the city. APA also works closely with SNAP, and assists clients with their SNAP co-payments.

"We're trying to prevent as many litters as possible, as quickly as possible," Meunier said. "We work real closely with SNAP on that."

Recipients can also give back by volunteering with APA. Gabby Montoya is one of those volunteers, and has been working various events for APA for the past six months, after she received pet food when she was struggling to make ends meet. APA also helped fund emergency stitches for one of her dogs, who suffered a 9-inch cut when Montoya was unable to afford expensive care. Montoya described APA as a "loving circle of people" and said both the help and education she has received have improved her relationship with her pets and her knowledge of them immensely.

"Through them, you get to appreciate your pets more, you get to care for them more, you get to understand certain behaviors about your pet and how to help them," she said.

APA was recently awarded a \$1,000 Gracie Grant from the Three Dog Bakery Foundation, one they had to compete with other organizations across the country. The agency stood out for its assistance to low-income pet owners and its various approaches to animal welfare issues, according to a press release.

"Our hope is that the Gracie Grant funds will help APA continue to make a difference for animals in Las Cruces," Three Dog Bakery president Scott Ragan said in the same press release.

Reaching out

Another of APA's focuses is on outreach, and educating the public on how to not be cruel to their animals and treat them humanely, whether it's not having their dog on a chain 24 hours a day or walking and playing with them, Meunier said.

Meunier said APA also recently did a shared vaccination clinic with other pet agencies, and is starting to provide some veterinary care assistance for clients. A future goal is to start adopting animals and housing them in foster care to be adopted at showcase events at local pet stores, she said.

Meunier is a busy woman — she has a full-time job as a technical writer and editor for the federal government, and runs APA on the side. But being industrious is rewarding for Meunier, who said she has been interested in animal welfare in the community for a long time.

"I think we're helping people, I think we're helping animals, meeting our goals slowly but surely, and I hope we grow," she said.

“It’s good to know there’s people out there that can understand what you’re going through, can understand your pain Montoya said. “I am very thankful to them.”

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