

South Daytona pet food pantry struggles with demand

Sophie's Circle does what it can to help out-of-work dog and cat owners

BY RAY WEISS, STAFF WRITER

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A pup is excited over bags of donated pet food at Sophie's Circle in South Daytona on Wednesday. The food goes to people who can no longer afford to feed their pets. (N-J | Nigel Cook)



Christi Sharp, left, and volunteer Marykay Ormsby organize donations. (N-J | Nigel Cook)

Expanding the Circle

What: Sophie's Circle, a pet food pantry.

Where: 933 Beville Road, Suite 102J, South Daytona.

When: Wednesdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Contact: For more information, call 386-843-2472 or go online at sophiescircle.com.

SOUTH DAYTONA -- The line for food stretched 15 deep a half hour after the small warehouse door opened.

Kathy Blackman, Christi Sharp and a few volunteers frantically packed and handed out another week's worth of rations to a steady flow of pet owners hit hard by the recession.

"We get about 150 people a day," said Blackman, 57, the founder of Sophie's Circle, a pet-food pantry that opened a year ago. "We try to supplement. But these people are flat broke."

Every Wednesday from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., folks pull their vehicles into the parking lot of the single-story business complex at 933 Beville Road, just east of Nova Road. Some pick up dog food; others, cat food. And still others need both.

But supplies are limited, depending on donations.

"We struggle every week to get food. We barely keep up," said Blackman, a New Smyrna Beach bakery owner by trade. "We run out each week."

Still, Sophie's Circle, a not-for-profit organization, does what it can to help household pet owners from as far away as Deltona and Palm Coast.

Blackman and Sharp -- the program's 43-year-old administrative director -- hope to open a second pantry one day in West Volusia, so out-of-work people can save \$5 to \$10 in gas money for the round-trip drive.

"Most of them lost their jobs. We have one guy who held a six-figure media marketing position. And he can't find anything," Blackman said. "Another woman lived in her car with her dog. She was in sales."

Mike Stefanick Jr., 60, an unemployed former Port Orange animal-control officer, picks up pet food each month for his two dogs and three birds.

"We're scrimping away as it is. But we'd find some way to feed the dogs. They are part of the family," he said. "But this is a big savings. A huge help."

Blackman, a self-acknowledged pet lover, was moved into action because more than people were being hurt by the bad economy. She heard of animals going hungry or being abandoned at shelters, where many are put to death.

"These are not adoptable pets," she said of the vast majority she sees each week with their owners.

So Blackman came up with another option -- Sophie's Circle, named after a Siberian Husky she rescued in 2008.

"I saw how huge the need was," she said of her organization that has a growing roster of 500 people. "But I didn't know just how bad the situation was in the area."

Sophie's Circle counts on contributors, much like other struggling charitable organizations.

Last Wednesday, Al Gennaro and Theresa Winand dropped off 10 bags of dog and cat food, as well as litter and treats, donated by parishioners at Grace Episcopal Church in Port Orange. Not long after, Russ Faber and a friend came by, unloading a pickup with 50-pound bags of cat and dog food.

"Boy did we need this," one volunteer sighed.

Faber, of Ormond Beach, said his pet-lover wife, Robin, called him.

"She said they were in desperate need," he said of Sophie's Circle. "So we went to the store and grabbed some stuff. This should get them through next week."

New patrons like Tina Schroeder of Daytona Beach keep arriving, and must provide paperwork to prove their dog or cat has been spayed or neutered before receiving food. A minimum 50-cent donation is requested, but not required.

"Friends told me about this," said Schroeder, who's disabled with emphysema. "I took in a couple of cats and dogs from my neighborhood that I wouldn't have been able to afford without this group. I would have called the Humane Society, otherwise. This is a blessing, such a blessing."

But Blackman of Sophie's Circle said the blessings are limited.

"We go through thousands and thousands of pounds of food. It's insane," she said. "But at the end of the day, a lot of people are turned away. It's heartbreaking to see them stand and sob in the parking lot. And there's nothing we can do."