

BY KATIE INGMIRE

You're probably familiar with Meals on Wheels-type programs that provide food to seniors who can't shop for or prepare their own meals. Did you know that there are programs that help feed the pets of these seniors, too?

Erin Odermatt is the supervisor for one of these important programs, called AniMeals, part of the Helen Woodward Animal Center near San Diego. From packaging food to monitoring donation bins, volunteers contribute to nearly every aspect of the program, Erin said. Talk about a great give-back opportunity!

I checked in with Erin to learn more about AniMeals and the best ways to help out.

Q/ HOW DID ANIMEALS GET STARTED?

Erin Odermatt: The AniMeals program began on a small scale in 1984. The need for a program of this type became evident upon the discovery by a Meals-on-Wheels volunteer that some elderly clients were feeding portions of their own meals to their pets. Helen Woodward Animal Center made arrangements to provide regular pet meals to clients of that MOW center who had dogs or cats. Over the next nine years, HWAC provided weekly pet meals to about 10 pets in the community. One HWAC volunteer packaged the food and delivered it on a weekly basis to the MOW center. Over time, it became evident that there was a great need for this service in other communities. We contacted a number of area meal-delivery service groups and researched the depth of this demand. In 1993, we began to expand our services, entering into cooperative agreements with several centers. With the dedication of over 50 volunteers, we now provide regular pet meals to approximately 440 clients, assisting just over 700 pets throughout San Diego County. The program is free of cost to all recipients.

Q/ WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

EO: Most homebound individuals are somewhat isolated from the outside world. For these people, owning a pet can be especially meaningful. It provides companionship, diversion, social interaction, and even a reason for living. The daily responsibilities of pet ownership, however, can be difficult. AniMeals helps to ensure that quality, nutritious pet food is always available to people who may not have the wherewithal to provide for their



COURTESY HELEN WOODWARD ANIMAL CENTER/THE ANGEL'S DEPOT



very best friends. Our program actively works to keep pets with their owners and out of shelters, ultimately reducing the number of pets that would have to otherwise be relinquished by senior and disabled pet owners.

Q/ WHAT KIND OF HELP DO PROGRAMS LIKE ANIMEALS USUALLY NEED MOST?

EO: Most importantly, we need food — any brand of dry or canned dog and cat food. Keeping an adequate supply of pet food on our shelves is the program's biggest challenge. We only ask that it is unopened, unexpired, and nonprescription. When food is donated directly to the program, it can be processed and distributed quickly to our clients.

Q/ WHAT ARE OTHER WAYS PEOPLE CAN GET INVOLVED WITH ANIMEALS AND SIMILAR PROGRAMS AROUND THE COUNTRY?

EO: If a program like AniMeals does not already exist in your area, look into starting one! Call around to local senior centers, and determine what the need in your area is. The AniMeals program runs almost entirely on donations and with the help of volunteers. A program like this is proof of what can be accomplished with a little organization and a lot of determination. Starting small is OK, and most importantly, not growing beyond your means is crucial. Every little bit helps, and the people you assist are truly grateful.

Note: Thoroughly research an organization before you volunteer or donate.