

Providing hope

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SAM'S HOPE

Sam's Hope is a nonprofit dedicated to providing food and care for the pets of people in need. The organization's newest drive location is the Pet Valu in Huntingdon Valley.

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Wire Staff Writer

There are many organizations dedicated to feeding hungry people, but what about their pets?

That's the question Marianne Iaquinto found herself asking as she recalled her dog, the late Samantha. "She was a special-needs pet: seriously ill and with allergies. I often wondered if someone less fortunate would have to put her in a shelter."

Those ideas led to Sam's Hope. Founded in January of this year in honor of her pet, the nonprofit organization raises food and funds to help people in need keep their pets. "With the economy the way it is, many people can't afford their pets," Iaquinto explained. "When it's the difference between the kids and the dog to feed, the dog loses."

By helping the pets of families in need, Sam's Hope also helps their owners. Pets, Iaquinto pointed out, provide companionship and emotional support.

"[Needy families] have so much going on that the animals are often the stable thing. And, kids learn responsibility from owning a pet," she explained. "They can also give you a sense of purpose. That, especially in the elderly, is important."

To prevent that from happening, laquinto, along with a small group of family and friends, started by setting up pet food drives in supermarkets and pet stores. One of their first drives, at the Shop n Bag in Richboro, was a huge success and set the tone for more efforts. The store let Sam's Hope put a box where people could drop off donations, and the group regularly collects 50 to 100 pounds of food a week. "It was supposed to last only one month, but people have been so generous that it's stayed there," laquinto said.

Based on this early success, the group began receiving donations from two Wal-Mart locations and started new food drives in a growing radius. Their newest drive location is the Pet Valu in Huntingdon Valley. "At first I wasn't sure how people would receive [the drives]. But now I realize how generous people are," laquinto said. "Most people are pet owners. It's been great."

That generosity has translated into Sam's Hope distributing more than 3,000 pounds of pet food to three local food pantries since July "The food pantries are excited because so many of their people have pets," said laquinto. "I knew there was a need, but I'm finding out there's more need than I realized."

And, Sam's Hope is finding new ways to meet those needs. The group recently partnered with Animal Lifeline in Warrington and received its first grant for veterinary assistance from Banfield Charitable Trust. The grant has already allowed Sam's Hope to move forward with a new service: people who prove need can receive up to \$500 for basic healthcare for their pets.

The program has already found its first recipient: a disabled woman from Northeast Philadelphia whom laquinto herself drove to the veterinarian to get yearly immunizations for her dog. "The dog was diagnosed with a level 4 heart murmur. We were able to get him tested and on medication," laquinto recalled.

With this grant and more programs on the way, the next people in need may be the currently five people who volunteer for Sam's Hope's. "Right now, we're a close-knit group of friends and family, helping 20 families with 150 pets right now," laquinto noted. The group is working with three food pantries and is looking to work with more by the end of the year. "If we get three more who want in, we'll need more people."

For information on Sam's Hope or to find pet food drive locations, call 267-753-0510 or visit

<http://www.samshope.org>