

The Humane Society's Food Bowl needs help

BY LACEY AVERY

When money gets tight, most families give up expensive restaurants or lavish gifts without much grumbling. But when economic times are really tough, as they are during the recovery from the Great Recession, some families face the loss of something far more dear—the family pet.

Aware of the costs that go along with caring for a pet, the Athens Area Humane Society created The Food Bowl, a program to help struggling families secure pet food.

“We want it to be so that animals aren't going into a shelter because their families can't afford to feed them. We wanted them to have at least one other alternative,” said Denise Plemmons, special projects manager at AAHS.

Unfortunately, The Food Bowl is nearly empty. The program relies on donors to contribute pet food that the Humane Society then distributes free to households in need. Now, however, the Food Bowl has only enough food to assist three participants, a dramatic drop from its early days in 2009.

Although it is never easy to attract donations, Plemmons said there was a burst of enthusiasm during the first six to eight months. With food available, many local residents sought help and got it. Then donations began falling off.

“Every month it was a struggle to get the food,” said Plemmons. “We had a lot of people coming to get food; we had a line of people out the door.”

The program was originally open to anyone who said they couldn't afford to feed their pets. When demand far outstripped supply, Plemmons said AAHS had to set up new eligibility guidelines and began requiring volunteer work in exchange for food.

According to Plemmons, only people who can prove they are eligible for help can participate. They must also show that their pets are

current on their rabies vaccinations and are spayed or neutered. Finally, the pet owner must volunteer for two hours of work at the animal shelter or clinic in exchange for taking home a one-month supply of food for up to two pets.

AAHS is campaigning to rebuild its food stockpile. It is employing a new tactic to garner additional donations by partnering with more local businesses to create more food drop-off points.

There are now six points, two of which are located in Oconee County. Both the Athens Area Humane Society Spay and Neuter Center in Watkinsville and ResCare, a facility that provides in home care services located in Bogart, offer drop-off points to the public.

The newest drop-off point is the downtown Athens open art studio, gallery and lounge called ARTini's.

“I have my own business now and getting a food donation bin was one of the top priorities,” said Kate Cook, owner and resident artist. “It gives people that care for animals another place to drop food off because a lot of the places are pet stores and I'm a retail store downtown.”

Winter months can be especially hard on people who can barely make ends meet, but Plemmons said AAHS hopes to expand The Food Bowl program in January 2012. The shelter hopes to collect enough food to sustain participants for longer periods, not just day-to-day.

Donations can include food in cans or pouches, bags or boxes of dry food, and sometimes food that has been opened. “As long as it's not expired, it works for The Food Bowl,” said Lacey Lancaster, an adoption counselor with AAHS.

If you are interested in donating or having a drop-off point at your business, call (706) 353-2287 for more information.