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On the Positive Side

By MaryIn Zahler / For the Sun-News

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It was back in October 2009 when I first witnessed a most remarkable event: It was a Saturday and people - some of them with their pets - were patiently standing in line awaiting their turn in front of a building to receive free food for their companion animals. This recession has forced some of us to question whether we can afford to keep our pets, and the pet food bank program is ACTION for Animals' response to that need.

To receive this assistance, proof of residency in Dona Ana County has to be provided, as well as proof of income/need. An application is also completed and kept on file. In addition to food, pet items such as harnesses, leashes, collars, treats and toys are given out, when available. Long-term recipients are asked to give back to APA and the community by volunteering or by becoming more responsible pet guardians.

What made this event such a positive happening was the variety of volunteers working the food distribution. While assisting that day, I learned about a man so adamant to help out that though he didn't drive, he was able to convince friends and family members to transport him where needed so he could offer his services. The volunteers on duty that day were a typical example of "Johnny on the Spot." When there was something to be done, such as carry a bag of dog food to a car or help those in line who had questions or needed assistance in filling out the application, there was someone to help.

Most of the energetic volunteers were strangers to

me. Manning the small table at the head of the line were four people I did know: Julie Miller from ACTION Programs for Animals (APA) and the Spay Neuter Action Program; Linda Hall from APA and the Animal Services of the Mesilla Valley Strategic Planning Committee; Jean Gilbert from APA and the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico; and Michel Meunier, president and founder of APA.

The pet food bank is her brain child; APA started the pet food bank in June 2009. Since then, they have distributed more than 45,000 pounds of food to hundreds of low-income, disabled, unemployed and homeless families. In September 2009 alone, they distributed almost three tons of food.

Positive happenings are not restricted to these second Saturdays. On other days and at local events as well, you will see APA volunteers set up their tables, chairs and canopy, such as in front of the Sam's Club exit. It is at these locations where APA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, interacts with the public and offers free animal-welfare advice and information. They also invite the public to join in their efforts to help alleviate some of the pain of this recession and to help them grow to provide more outreach and services in the future. People can donate bags of food if they wish or make a monetary donation to APA if they prefer; pet food donation bins are located in various locations throughout the city.

Accolades to all who have participated in this great venture, including all those good and kind people who gave so generously to help those less fortunate.

Unfortunately, it has come to my attention that the pet food bank is struggling to meet the demand and need in our community and is postponing its monthly distributions a couple of months while the

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organization works on much-needed fundraising for the food bank and future programs (possibilities include helping get dogs off chains, helping no- to low-income people with vet care costs and offering wellness clinics, and other positive humane outreach efforts). However, APA assures the pet food bank program will be back in swing very soon. In the meantime, the organization is looking for a new donated warehouse/distribution space for the pet food bank as well. They've basically outgrown their space and funds at this time, with more than 130 people showing up at the last distribution in January alone.

For more information about APA, visit the Web site at www.actionprogramsforanimals.org . They have added an Animals in Need page that features lost and found pets as well as pets needing new homes in the Las Cruces/El Paso area.

Maryln Zahler is vice president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico

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