

Pet Talk: Portland's new pet food bank was decades in the making

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Larry Chusid says he'll hand out eight tons of pet food a month from his new pet food bank, The Pongo Fund -- named for his late dog, Pongo.

You don't build what might end up being the largest pet food bank in the country overnight. At least not if you're Larry Chusid. You build slowly, carefully, tuned in for signals that it's time to take the next step.

The Pongo Fund Pet Food Bank, a huge effort to help not just pets but also families in need that opens across from the Oregon Convention Center on Sunday, has been in the making for decades.

It started with two dogs tied to a shopping cart downtown some 30 years ago. Chusid, then a student at Portland State University, wanted to help the companions of a homeless man he always saw near campus and bought them a bag of dog food.

This gesture was not extraordinary for Chusid. For years, he made care packages of food and sundries and handed them out to those without shelter, helping however he could.

Meanwhile, he ran several successful businesses and had dogs of his own. The last, Pongo, died in October 2007.

Later that month, Chusid got the first signal to focus his charitable efforts. He noticed two dogs at a homeless campsite and stopped to ask their owners if they'd be OK for Thanksgiving. The people said they'd be fine, but none of the food pantries had pet food. Could Chusid get them food for the pups?

That's how the Pongo Fund started. Soon Chusid was handing out pet food to homeless owners all over town. Since that Thanksgiving two years ago, he estimates, he's given out more than 100,000 pet meals. That also helps the people, who would otherwise feed their own rations to the pets.

This year, Chusid got the next signal to move forward. He was getting pet food out of his car on a freezing day in January when a woman stopped.

"What are you doing?" she inquired.

"I'm feeding homeless pets," Chusid replied.

"No, you're not."

"Really? What am I doing then?"

"You're feeding the soul of a family," the woman replied.

She was a social worker on her way to check on a family in dire straits. About a month earlier, the parents had told their children that there just wasn't enough money to feed everyone, that they didn't want the dog to go hungry and that it would go to live with a family who could afford to feed it.

Now the woman was going to see the family because the children had become despondent -- and not just because their dog, and the emotional support it provided, was gone. The children thought they'd be next in line to go live somewhere else if money was tight again.

Chusid realized there was a whole population on the verge of homelessness that had never had to worry about hunger before.

"The people on the street, they know where they can get food," he says. "It's the people indoors, suffering silently, that don't know where to go."

In April, Chusid went to a pet-product trade show and happened to meet the owners of [Canidae Pet Foods](#), the California company that had supported the Pongo Fund from the start. He told them he had an idea for a pet food bank in Portland for people struggling to pay their bills who might give up their pets otherwise.

The Canidae people shocked Chusid by offering \$125,000 worth of food on the spot. He had to tell them he wasn't ready yet.

He now needed a space, volunteers, grants and fundraisers. He needed to form a nonprofit organization. Hoping for tips on how to find free legal services for doing so, Chusid went to see [Alan Jensen](#), a high-powered tax attorney and partner at the law firm Holland & Knight with deep connections to Portland's animal community.

They talked and it turned out that Jensen used to see, out of his old office window, the same homeless man for whom Chusid had bought a bag of dog food 30 years earlier. Jensen particularly remembered the man feeding a dog part of a sandwich, which the dog spit out.

This encapsulated the lose-lose situation an increasing number of people are in: because of lack of pet food, the owner ends up with less to eat and the dog still doesn't get properly fed.

Chusid ended up getting a nationally renowned attorney to work for him for free. Then the Portland Development Commission provided space, and the Portland-based Hedinger Family Foundation got on board.

Now pallets upon pallets of pet food are sitting in a warehouse on Northeast Martin Luther King Boulevard, ready for the doors to open. There are three semitrailers' worth of kibble and cans -- more pet food than you've ever seen.

The demand to meet that supply is there. The two other pet food banks in the Portland area -- both at least 15 miles from downtown -- have given out increasing amounts of food since they opened. In Sherwood, the [Cat Adoption Team](#)'s food bank, the larger and older of the two, gave out 2,500 pounds of cat food just in the past month. And people are coming from as far as Vancouver and Troutdale.

Local agencies are welcoming the new resource. [211info](#), a local call center that provides information about emergency food, shelter and health services to anyone who needs it, will now point clients with pets to the Pongo Fund.

"I was really thrilled to hear about Larry's project," says Susan Salisbury, a resource specialist with 211info. "We've been looking for a service like this for some time."

Even the state will send people to the Pongo Fund. Chusid told a local caseworker for the Oregon Department of Human Services about his plans a while ago. The caseworker asked her boss if she could tell her clients about the pet food bank. The answer was yes.

"When I heard about this I thought, 'What a great idea,' " says Gene Evans, a department spokesman. "When people hear food stamps don't cover pet food, they ask what they're supposed to do. Now caseworkers can point out this resource."

Chusid is ready for them now. He is planning on handing out eight tons of food a month. That's 16,000 pounds -- more than a thousand large bags of food. While no one compiles

national statistics for this kind of thing, according to media reports from other cities, these numbers would make the Pongo Fund the largest pet food bank in the country.

Not that that matters.

"The numbers aren't the important thing," Chusid says in his self-effacing manner. He's a little uncomfortable being in the spotlight.

"For years only the homeless knew about me. Now I'm shining a light on this to say we all could help."

-- [Jacques Von Lunen](#)