

'Paper towels or pet food'

With prices high, pantries offer way to have both

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Pet owners facing inflation-induced prices when purchasing food for their furry companions are sometimes forced to make difficult choices: fork over their last dollar for kibble or spend the money on groceries for themselves.

Owners facing such a dilemma are increasingly turning to pet food pantries, private, town- and nonprofit-run, which operate as a safety net to meet the needs of humans and animals alike. The goal is to help reduce the number of pets surrendered to shelters because of strapped finances and to ensure owners aren't going hungry to feed their pets, officials said.

The latest nationwide consumer price index from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics shows shoppers are paying 14.4% more for pet food this year than they did last year. Pet supplies are up 4.4%. That's on top of the 5% increase in costs for human food. Pet pantry officials said clients struggle to afford necessities.

Marilyn Demonaco, 64, relies on Baxter's Pet Pantry near her home in Lindenhurst—the animal supplies arm of Long Island Cares—to feed her dog, Max. Demonaco, a Lowe's retiree on a limited income, said the rising cost of pet food makes it difficult for her to buy the usual food for Max, so he often noshes on human-food leftovers because it's cheaper.

"Everybody is suffering from inflation right now. It's hard to put food on the table for everybody, the dog also," Demonaco said. "It's kind of hard when you have to decide, 'What am I going to buy? Paper towels or pet food?'"

Owners feeding pets first

Demonaco visits Baxter's monthly to collect food for Max, a 10-year old black Labrador mix with a graying face. She's one of the 230 pet pantry visitors Long Island Cares sees monthly, CEO



Paule Pachter, CEO of Long Island Cares, inside Baxter's Pet Pantry last month in Lindenhurst.

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Paule Pachter said.

Baxter's Pet Pantry in Lindenhurst is Pachter's brainchild, named after his late dog Baxter, "a little square-faced pug," who died in 2010 from Cushing's disease. Clients can peruse the pantry and grab the supplies they need, including food, toys, crates and accessories.

Pachter pushed for the nonprofit to include pet food in 2009 when many clients, facing financial hardship from the recession, asked about animal supplies. Their inquiries coincided with the nonprofit Animal Relief Fund asking the pantry to distribute pet food. The nonprofit was the first Feeding America partner to launch a pet pantry, he said, adding food banks nationwide

followed suit.

Long Island Cares has since created other satellite pet pantry locations, in Huntington, Hampton Bays and Bethpage, with plans to launch a fifth in Valley Stream. Satellite locations have seen a 58% increase in visitors since last year, Pachter said.

"If you can't afford to feed your dog, don't put them in the shelter. We can help you," he said of struggling pet owners. "They're making some choices that aren't to their benefit—the main choice being feed their pets or feed themselves."

Kathy Ramos of West Sayville is a caseworker whose clients have mental health and substance abuse issues. She uses Baxter's to supply clients who lack human or pet food. Many of her clients sacrifice

their meals to ensure their pets are eating, she said.

"I've heard people say that if they can't afford [pets] then they shouldn't get [them]. It's not that simple," Ramos said. "These animals are their bridge to life. That's their purpose of getting up in the mornings. . . . They take better care of their pets than they do themselves."

At the Southampton Animal Shelter Foundation's pet food pantry, which is operated independently from the town, residents can collect items donated by the community. Spokeswoman Nicole Tumilowicz said the pantry opened in 2010, but the shelter has seen a growing need because of inflation.

"It's difficult because since COVID-19 and the supply chain issues, it was hard to get food," she said. "A lot of people were

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Pet food pantries offer** a safety net for Long Islanders who struggle to afford necessities for their animals.
- **The latest federal Bureau of Labor Statistics** consumer price index report shows shoppers are paying 14.4% more for pet food this year than they did last year.
- **Pantry officials said** people struggling to afford pet food are facing difficult decisions, like choosing to feed their pets over themselves.

reaching out to us."

At least four towns—Hempstead, Southold, Brookhaven and Riverhead—have pet food pantries.

Pet pantries also struggling

Danielle Scala-Nathan of Valley Stream harnesses the power of Facebook to help pet owners through her 4,700-member group, Paw It Forward Pet Pantry, which she said was the first private pantry in Nassau County. She and her late husband, Rob Nathan, both animal lovers, transformed their basement into the pantry. Volunteers distribute pet food monthly to people in Queens, Nassau and Western Suffolk from Scala-Nathan's home. In March, the pantry provided food for over 60 pets, Scala-Nathan said.

"Our mission is to help pet owners that have fallen onto financial hard times so they don't have to surrender their pets," she said.

Just as her clients are struggling financially, so is Scala-Nathan, who lost two incomes when her husband died from the coronavirus and she was diagnosed with lung cancer. The pet pantry, which relies on donations and her own money, is her passion but has been costly to maintain, so she is raising funds for both her and the pantry.

"The pantry is either going to close or go on a smaller scale or relocate it somewhere else," she said. "It's been really hard for me to keep everything going."