The Pongo Fund gets ready to run with the big dogs

Two months after opening, pet food bank is already among the nation's largest

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He has no paid staff, draws no salary and has no stable source of revenue. But Larry Chusid says he's onto something big. And he might be right.

Chusid is the founder of a pet food bank known as The Pongo Fund. Even though it's only been open a few months, it's already one of the country's largest such facilities, according to some accounts.

Formerly a greeting card executive, Chusid founded the organization two years ago in order to provide food for the pets of homeless people. He financed the effort out of pocket, driving a route around downtown and handing out pet food to homeless people with pets.

After the pet food makers Canidae and Dogswell each contributed $125,000 of pet food to his efforts, he decided to find a permanent home. He convinced the Portland Development Commission to let him use an unleasable 5,000-square-foot space near the Oregon Convention Center for free.

In November, he started opening the doors of the Pongo Fund twice a month (every other Sunday). He gives anybody who walks in two weeks of free pet food. He estimates he's given out $300,000 worth of food.

As a result of the recession and Oregon's high unemployment rate, the need for such an organization has perhaps never been greater.

The number of abandoned dogs received by Multnomah County Animal Services doubled last year.

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Larry Chusid founded The Pongo Fund with the help of $250,000 of donated pet food.

"These economic times obviously are tough on people and that also translates to pet ownership," said Mike Oswald, director of Multnomah County Animal Services. "Pets often times become victims of this economy, too."

Chusid sees the organization as more than an effort to save animals. It's an effort to save families.

"When it's a choice between paying for pet food and paying for heat, it's not an easy choice for a family," Chusid said. "It ultimately ends up in the life of an animal and rips a family apart."

Chusid says The Pongo Fund also relieve a burden on tax dollars.

It costs the county about $25 a day to house and feed a dog. Some of that comes from taxes.

Chusid can feed a dog for a month for about $20.

Although The Pongo Fund is still a puppy, Chusid plans to run with the big dogs.

He wants the organization's warehouse to become a clearinghouse for social service agencies. He also wants to partner with more hunger relief agencies.

One of the strengths of The Pongo Fund is its location. While there are pet food banks in other parts of the area, there aren't any in the downtown core, where many homeless people reside with their animals.

Oswald and others complimented Chusid on his business skills. He convinced Canidae and Dogswell to give him ongoing discounts in addition to massive donations. He also convinced prominent attorney and animal rights advocate Alan Jensen to give him free legal services.

"The idea is excellent," said Jensen, a Holland & Knight partner.

Yet despite its meteoric growth, the organization could quickly lose steam.

Until this point, the organization has relied on Chusid's goodwill and donations from pet food manufacturers — not the most stable business model.

"I'm curious to see how this will be sustainable," said Sharon Harmon, executive director of the Oregon Humane Society and a fan of Chusid's work.

The Humane Society gets roughly 70 percent of its operating budget from donations and another 13 percent from fees on services such as pet adoption. Around 7 percent comes from the organization's investment account. In-kind donations of services like attorney fees make up the remaining 10 percent.

Chusid recognizes the wobbly nature of his business plan and wants to organize his first official fundraiser this year.

The Pongo Fund also faces an uphill battle for name recognition.

The majority of donations to animal welfare causes goes to the Oregon Humane Society, Dove Lewis and Guide Dogs for the Blind.

"Donations would help," Chusid said. "We're still the new kid on the block."

The organization could also lose its roomy downtown home if the long-awaited convention center hotel project ever goes forward. Chusid has a 30-day lease with the Portland Development Commission that he hopes to perpetually renew.

Ever the optimist, Chusid said he has a second home lined up if The Pongo Fund needs to move.

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