THE COOP AND THE SEAN CASEY ANIMAL SHELTER

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Supporting Animal Rescue Efforts: PSFC Hopes to Reengage Members in Donation Program for Local Shelter

By Frank Haberle

Anybody who has been a Coop member for a reasonable amount of time has heard at least something about the Coop's longstanding relationship with CHIPS, a local soup kitchen and residence for young mothers. Coop members and staff have donated produce, volunteered and worked shifts to ensure support for this local community nonprofit.



On a much smaller scale, and completely under the radar, in the past decade the Coop has also moved products like cat litter, dog food and other essential supplies to Sean Casey Animal Rescue. Boxes of dented cans of dog and cat food and bags of litter in damaged packaging that would otherwise not sell on the Coop shopping floor have instead been packed up and delivered to the nearby Animal Rescue Center by a committed team of staff and members.

The effort to collect and move products to the shelter began several years before the COVID crisis, with coordinators and members working together to collect and deliver needed items to Sean Casey, located just off of Fort Hamilton Avenue in Kensington. Sean Casey Animal Rescue is a thriving animal rescue and rehabilitation center that currently takes in over 2,000 animals per year, more than any private rescue in New York. Sean Casey shelters and rehabilitates animals and then works to find them loving, adoptive homes. Operated largely by volunteers, since its founding in 1998, Sean Casey has saved more than 8,000 animals from the city's Animal Care & Control

alone.

Starting With Litter



The project started with a cat litter problem, remembers Jessa Fisher, then an on-site receiving coordinator and now a remote Coop staff member. “I was the Tuesday monitor, from 2:30 to 3:30,” Fisher recalls. “Every Tuesday afternoon, I had 20 to 30 receiving workers I was in charge of. I was obsessed with using every worker efficiently and not wasting time with people standing around not knowing what to do. (People probably hated having me as their monitor!) That’s when we came up with the lists of ‘things to do when you think there is nothing to do.’ ”

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One of the big jobs every Tuesday was handling the cat litter. “Every week we got a whole U-boat’s worth, maybe 40 bags total, of the World’s Best cat litter in both green and red bags from our main distributor, UNFI. We also received another 10 bags of the Feline Pine cat litter in bags. The World’s Best came shrink-wrapped in plastic, three bags to a bundle. But when the bundles got sent to the aisle, people would invariably use the sharp end of their box cutter to open [them] up, without anyone being there to instruct them. The bags would bust open, there was cat litter everywhere, and a perfectly usable but broken bag of cat litter had to be thrown out. This made the garbage really heavy and seemed like a total waste. At the time, it seemed like we were ripping open one out of every three bags.”

Fisher addressed the problem by dedicating shift workers to focus their attention on taking shrink wrap off bags of cat litter and putting them in milk crates, so they

stacked easier and there was less chance of bag damage. The member workers developed a technique using the blunt end of the box cutters. “During my receiving shift,” Fisher remembers, “I would have two strong people doing this job, dismantling a U-boat of cat litter and transferring bags into milk crates, sending the U-boats down to the basement and stacking very heavy crates of cat litter in the basement. Invariably, though, we still lost bags. Not only that, we always accumulated dented pet food cans or cans where the label was missing, neither of which we could sell. I couldn’t bear this going into the garbage as our normal soup kitchens didn’t take pet food, and we paid for our garbage by weight.”



Another coordinator came up with the idea of sending the food and litter to Sean Casey. “I called Sean Casey and, as it turned out, they were happy to be the recipients of our torn cat litter bags and dented cans,” Fisher recalled. “During my shift I would ask if any receiver wanted to go on a bike ride or drive their car to Sean Casey to drop off some donations. People were often willing to go (anything to get out of

stocking aisles), but didn't always have transportation. Two of our regular receiving workers, Zach Poff and David Cutler, were always happy and willing to make the delivery. (Shout out to Zach and David!) But those two were only here once every four weeks and we needed this done every week. I was the only receiving coordinator who oversaw this and it needed to get done once a week, or the dedicated milk crate we had on the top of the gray shelf in the receiving room for damaged goods would start overflowing. So I eventually made it a shift, and kind of tucked it in with the vitamin workers I oversaw."

The Need Today



COVID reshaped the project and limited the Coop's ability to dedicate time to collecting and delivering the supplies. Presently, there is no member shift committed to the pet supplies. But while the flow of donated materials has been stemmed, the need has grown. City-wide, after an initial burst of pet adoptions in the early months of the COVID crisis, the numbers of rescued dogs and cats began to soar again in the past

year, leading to overwhelming demand for programs like Sean Casey.



Fisher, who relocated to Rochester in 2020 and continues working remotely for the Coop as the vitamin and supplement coordinator, ensured that the project would continue, although it was slowed during the COVID period, when there were no longer shifts. Today, Receiving Coordinator Charles Parham, who has been at the Coop for several years in the meat and produce departments, has taken over the project. As Parham recalls, during COVID, “I noticed a build-up of pet food in the receiving area, and I connected with Sean Casey. I now take the materials directly to Sean Casey. The amount varies from week to week, depending on breakages that occur when pallets arrive off the truck, or when members mistakenly cut into bags, or dented cans.” Parham’s interactions with the Sean Casey staff are limited when he drops off the materials at a table set up outside the facility for donations (at 153 East Third Street). “I go in and we say hello, but only briefly,” he explains. “The staff there are really focused on taking care of the animals.”

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Asked about the possible return of a member shift to support this project, Parham said that “bringing the shift back could happen, but it might have to be modified. Regular pickup of pet items might not be required or available always. So maybe the shift would include other Coop work in addition to the pet food drop-off. Reflecting on other ways that members can support this effort, Parham added that we could conduct a pet food drive, similar to what we do for CHIPS. “I think if the members knew more about the need, they would certainly help.”



Sean Casey Animal Rescue welcomes volunteers, donations, animal foster families and adoptions. For more information please visit https://www.nyanimalrescue.org/volunteer.

Frank Haberle has been a Coop member for nearly 30 years. He works for New Settlement in the Bronx and is the author of the novel Shufflers*.*