

## Canton's CHAI Works program helps connect pets, owners

"There is just something about spending time with animals that puts a smile on your face," said Heidi Isler, the manager of JF&CS CHAI Works-South in Canton. "Petting a dog or a cat is so soothing, so healing."

For participants in the community-based day program for adults with disabilities, volunteering with the Pet Pantry has been an opportunity to connect with new four-legged friends, and their owners.

The Pet Pantry is a nonprofit organization in Brockton that distributes pet food and related items to those in need. Founded in 2009, it helps families keep their pets in their homes when they are struggling financially.

"We have served people who are enduring all kinds of situations," said Corinne Lawson, president of The Pet Pantry. "We have clients who have undergone major surgeries and are paying off medical bills, single parents or those who are recently divorced, veterans, senior citizens and people with disabilities."

Since July 2019, CHAI

Works-South has been helping the Pet Pantry with distributions every few weeks. The distribution process begins at the Pet Pantry's outpost at the Animal Protection Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, where the CHAI Works team picks up large bags of dog and cat food, cat litter, leashes and toys. Next, volunteers take the donated supplies back to the CHAI Works office where they measure, rebag, and relabel the pet food and litter.

"Preparing the pet supplies for distribution is very instructive," Isler said. "Our participants learn to work as a team, to clearly communicate with one another, and to take pride in their work."

In addition to preparing the donated items, CHAI Works participants make its own homemade dog biscuits and toys to distribute to Pet Pantry clients.

### Distributing pet supplies

After all of the supplies have been rebagged and relabeled, the CHAI Works team heads over to Sullivan Towers, an

affordable housing development in Brockton, to distribute the items.

"Visiting Sullivan Towers is such a meaningful experience for our participants," Isler said. "They really enjoy having the chance to interact directly with the people and animals they are helping."

During each distribution, the CHAI Works volunteers set up a table with all of the available pet supplies, so residents at the complex can "go shopping" for the items they need.

### A rewarding partnership

During most visits to Sullivan Towers, some of the residents will bring their furry friends to the distribution.

"Interacting with the dogs and cats at the apartment complex is a blast for the CHAI Works volunteers," Isler said. "Most of our participants don't have pets at home, so this is a real treat."

The Pet Pantry is working on converting a semi-trailer into a new distribution/storage center and hopes to expand its services to more communities.

For more information on JF&CS Day Programming and Employment Services, which creates opportunities for individuals with disabilities to lead productive and integrated lives in their communities, call 781-647-5327 or visit online at <http://jfcsboston.org>.

