

BY KATIE A. VOSS

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that six to eight million dogs and cats wind up in animal shelters each year. Only half of those pets are lucky enough to find a home.

How can you—short on cash and strapped for time—make a difference in the life of a down-on-its-luck dog or cat?

Jennifer Schlueter, director of development at Chicago's Tree House Foundation, which takes in close to 600 stray cats each year, and Elizabeth Curran, president of Lakeshore Animal Shelter, Chicago's oldest no-kill shelter, provide some easy ways to brighten up a homeless animal's day.

Donate

Take an inventory of your closet. Bet you see some old sweaters that make you wonder, "Why did I even buy that?" Have any old blankets and towels lying around? And what about that stack of newspapers you were going to recycle? Your local animal shelter would love those things!

"Every single cage, every single kind of surface in the entire shelter is covered every single day with some type of blanket or towel," Schlueter says. "I'm estimating we go through 1,000 towels or blankets a day."

"Lake Shore Animal Shelter receives no government funding and we are 100 percent supported by donations," adds Curran. "We do ask for monetary donations, but appreciate any donations of towels, leashes, collars, laundry detergents, baby gates and dog cookies, too!"

If your picky pooch has been turning up her nose at some of the high-quality food you bought, you can send it to a needy nearby shelter. "Premium dog foods are better for the dogs who often come in malnourished," Curran says. Shelters also need old beds, crates and carriers, grooming tools, half-empty bottles of bleach and disinfectant sprays, old office and medical supplies and even items they can sell to raise money.

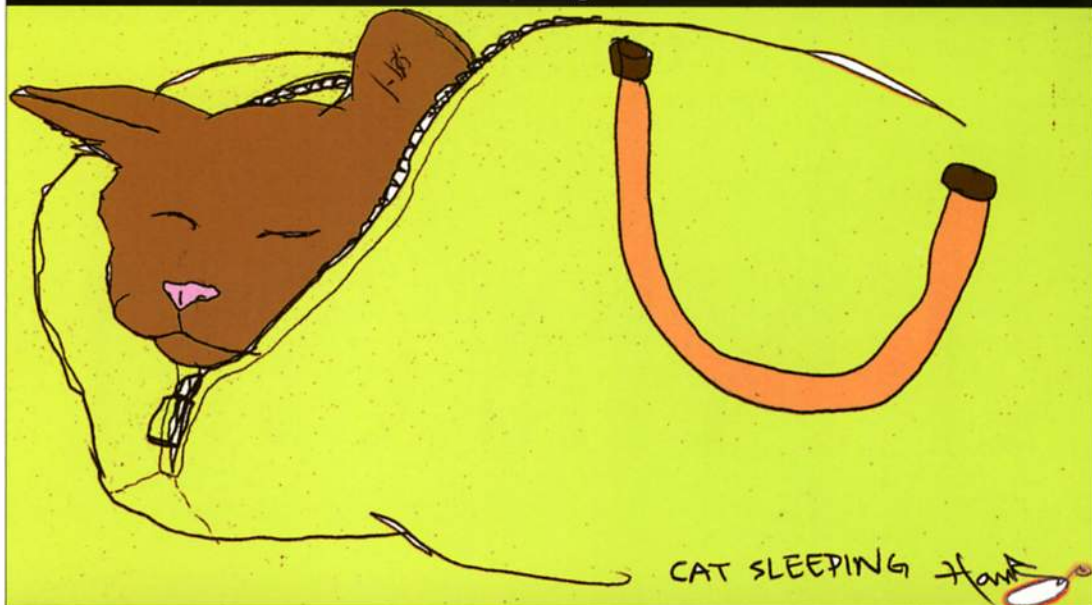
"A really big supporter of ours passed away and her husband didn't know what to do with her diamond ring," Schlueter says. "Finally he said, 'You know, this is just sitting in a drawer and she'd like for you to have it.' So we took it and sold it and made a tribute for her in our newsletter."

Shelters post wish lists on their websites, along with delivery hours and item specifications. Consider placing a donation box at your workplace or school to collect donations from other people, too.

Shop

Tree House and Jewel host Shop 'n' Share days, when a percentage of the cost of your groceries goes

Your small acts can make a big difference



Help for homeless pets

to the shelter. Simply call or log onto a shelter's website to find the dates. Many shelters also raise money by selling coupon books.

Some Internet sites allow you to donate money by shopping. When you sign up at iGive.com, you can shop at more than 600 stores and 26 percent of each purchase goes to a charity of your choice. Greatergood.com donates up to 30 percent of each purchase, but doesn't have as many stores available. Another option is www.dogoodtoolbar.com.

Or take a trip! Tree House receives a portion of the amount spent on every vacation booked through Jill Sussman at Blue Skies Travel (847.697.6733).

Be creative

There are plenty of ways to help out homeless animals while flexing your artistic muscle. Lakeshore Animal Shelter needs photographers to take pictures of animals looking for homes for its website and newsletters. "Our animals are always photographed as a critical part of getting them adopted," Curran says.

Shelters also need artwork to raffle or auction off at fundraisers. "We'd really like animal-related art, but it doesn't always have to be," Schlueter says.

Schlueter hopes to hold a Tree House Foundation pet fashion show later this year, featuring work by Chicago fashion and design students.

Other easy actions

"We're on something called ithinkinc.com,

where you can take surveys and they'll pay us for your time," says Schlueter. That's right; all you have to do is offer your opinion and some cats get some much-needed cash.

Doing some research for homework? Try www.goodsearch.com, the Yahoo!-powered search engine that donates 50 percent of the revenue to charities and schools designated by users.

You can also volunteer, even if you don't have much time to spare. Tree House Animal Foundation requires only six hours a month from volunteers. Shelters often are understaffed while planning their big fundraising events and welcome temporary volunteers. "You don't have to be one of our [full-time] volunteers because I take people in for just events all the time," Schlueter says. "All of that information is on our website. If you just see something that you think, 'Oh that looks like fun,' you can just email us."

Volunteer opportunities aren't all open to everyone. Lakeshore Animal Shelter prefers that volunteers be over 21 and have experience working with dogs and cats. "Animals in shelters can be unpredictable and it really takes a person who can read the animal and understand how to work with them," says Curran.

Volunteering is often hard work, but it's not without its rewards. And sometimes it can be downright fun. "Even if you came in and said 'Okay, I'm going to clean all the litter boxes in this room today and then spend the rest of my time hanging out with the cats,' that's fine," Schlueter says.