



Pro-Bone-O client Dave Jones waited more than three hours to receive care for Gizmo. "It was well worth it," he said.

JACQUELYN LEWIS

Companions

Homeless people with pets find help.

Illian Wagner and Dave Jones are doting pet owners. The pair beams when the sleek, gentle doberman pincer they call Maggie May Jones thrusts out a paw to "shake," while Gizmo Dozer Jones, a tiny black ball of energy and fur, shimmies between their feet. "They are always doing something new," Wagner says with a loving glance toward Maggie. "It's like watching kids grow up."

One look at the dogs reveals that the two are indeed as pampered and well looked after as the most beloved children. Maggie's light brown fur shimmers on top of well-defined muscles, and chubby Gizmo almost appears to be smiling. What is not immediately evident is that Jones, Wagner and both pets are homeless. This small family drifts from one temporary shelter to another — a situation Jones describes as "the middle of nowhere."

But today, Wagner, Jones, and especially Maggie and Gizmo, have found a small pocket of warmth in the heart of Eugene. Along with more than 20 other homeless pet owners, they gather at Pro-Bone-O, a non-profit animal clinic which provides free veterinary services for the pets of homeless people in the Lane County area.

Pro-Bone-O secretary and treasurer Lyn Gilman-Garrick says the clinic began back in 1997 when she and local veterinarian Doreen Hock became inspired by the devotion of pet owners like Jones and Wagner.

"What Doreen saw was how much pets meant to people and how they would do just about anything for them," Gilman-Garrick says. She adds that the organization modeled its services after similar clinics that were in operation in Seattle and Davis, Calif.

The organization operates out of a space donated from St. Vincent de Paul at their Lindholm Service Center on Highway 99 North. This rainy Sunday, the small, warm waiting area is stacked with donated dog and cat food, vitamins, toys, and even tiny hand-

made Christmas T-shirts. The room is a flurry of activity as volunteers hustle to care for more than 31 pets within the clinic's designated four-hour time period.

Homeless people hoping to find care for their pets arrive at these clinics in droves — by car, bus, bike, foot and just about any other mode of transportation available — and they often wait more than three hours to see the veterinarian. "There are usually at least 20 people on the list each clinic, and we usually have to turn people away," board of directors member Jeannie Peterson says.



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Pro-Bone-O volunteers clip the nails of T.J., a miniature pincer.

In order to qualify for assistance, Peterson says clients must match a "federal definition of homelessness," meaning they lack permanent shelter. Many of the clinic's visitors are pet owners living in their cars or at camp sites. For these people, Pro-Bone-O offers a full spectrum of basic veterinary services, including vaccines, de-worming, flea medication, skin, ear and wound care, along with occasional emergency assistance. Clients can also pick up free bags of dog food and other pet accessories. In addition, the clinic gives out four spay and neuter vouchers each month.

All of this is brought together by 15 local veterinarians and their staffs who volunteer for the organization, 15 volunteers from the community, donations from local veterinary clinics and individuals, as well as fund-raisers. Several clinics provide free used, returned or out-of-date supplies. Pro-Bone-O mostly cares for dogs and cats, but they accept many types of animals, from rabbits to rats, and even a chicken.

The clinic's volunteers and clients alike sing the praises of Pro-Bone-O. "I volunteer because I see the need and I have the skills to help," veterinarian Roberta Boyden says. "It's very rewarding. The improvement in animal health is paramount and wonderful."

"Ryha owes her life to the kindness of this clinic," one client says, pointing to a huge, tan-colored mastiff.

"I'm glad they have this, because I really don't have the money to take him to a vet," client Dee Lay echoes, patting a fluffy black dog she laughingly calls Butthead.

There are some pets here who aren't as healthy as Ryha, Butthead, or Maggie and Gizmo. Their ailments

range from uncontrollable diarrhea to a fox trap wound. But, Boyden says, the clinic rarely encounters neglected pets.

"We don't seem to see starving animals," she says. "Their basic needs are being met."

The volunteers also say they see just as many or more neglected pets who live in stable homes. Boyden points out that the animals of homeless people are often better socialized than regular pets as well. "Their families spend a lot of time with them," she says.

Peterson agrees. "They are typically not put on a chain and left," she says. "It's harder for [the homeless] to take care of their pets, but I think it's just like anyone if they make it their priority."

However, Peterson says she still encounters individuals who say homeless people should not have pets at all. "But all they have to do is volunteer here once, and they will change their minds," she says. "[The clients] provide a home for a lot of animals that wouldn't have homes or would be killed in the shelters."

Board member Vicki Bockes says many of Pro-Bone-O's clients rescued their pets. One man found a litter of puppies in a dumpster, another saved the Boston terrier he saw being tossed from a moving car, and another found a dog abandoned behind a local grocery store.

Bockes says homelessness — for people and animals — is a result of society's throw-away attitude. "We live in a cast-off society," she says. "We cast off our pets and our people as well. It's disgusting. By taking in these animals, homeless people are stopping a pretty ugly circle in their own way."

Peterson adds that pets provide rare comfort and companionship for the homeless community. "It's their sanity and their lifeline," she says.

Bockes agrees. "Simply because they don't have a home doesn't mean they should be denied the unconditional love that pets give."

Lay, a regular client who lives at a camp site, says her dog has been the difference between life and death. "I decided I needed somebody, because I'm by myself." She adds that most of her family members have died in the past couple of years. "He's my life," she says, holding Butthead on a red leash, "He's the only family I've got. If I didn't have him, I probably would have committed suicide already."

Wagner says she feels a similar connection to Maggie and Gizmo. "Pets are a comfort to people," she says, looking around. "They love you no matter what."

Bockes says Pro-Bone-O is imperative to the lives of not only the animals, but also the people the organization touches.

"With the clients that we serve, we are 'it,' and this makes it even more incumbent on us to do more," she says. "These people have very few resources, and without us, even for a moment in time, they might fall further into the cracks." **EW**

More About Pro-Bone-O

Pro-Bone-O operates on the second and fourth Sunday of every month, from 9 am to 1 pm at the St. Vincent De Paul Lindholm Service Station, located on Highway 99 North. (The office will, however, be closed Dec. 28.) The clinic's goals are to improve the health and well-being of pets and people who are homeless and cannot afford veterinary care, to prevent unwanted litters through education and, when possible, offer financial assistance for spaying and neutering, and to stop the spread of infectious diseases and parasites in the community.