

Meals On Wheels For Pets Christmas Project

By Cindy Ratliff



Troop 119, The Lone Star Paws Squad, began a project in the fall of 2004 that we hope will be an annual event. I was asked to write about it for the web site, in case other DSA troops or individuals would like to do a similar project.

One of our troop members has a co-worker who is a volunteer for Meals on Wheels. They were discussing the program one day and the volunteer mentioned that many of these elderly and handicapped people have pets and would share their hot meals delivered by Meals on Wheels with their pets. Meals on Wheels recognized that this was a problem as the client, then, was not receiving their full nutritional meal. They developed a program a couple of years ago called Meals on Wheels Pet Companion Program in which they teamed up with a local non-profit animal welfare and adoption agency which helped supply pet food, free of charge, to those Meals On Wheels clients who have dogs or cats. Meals on Wheels has case workers that maintain contact with the clients to determine dietary needs, etc. Once the Meals on Wheels Pet Companion Program began, the case workers began to also assess the needs of the pets and would note when a bag of food needed to be delivered.

After learning about the steps Meals on Wheels had taken to help the animals, our troop member came to us with the idea that we provide Doggie Christmas Bags. While the Meals on Wheels recipients were receiving dog food for their dogs, they were not able to provide any of the extras – toys, treats, etc.

Thus began Troop 119's Meals on Wheels Doggie Christmas Bags project.

The troop members were excited about being able to provide for needy dogs in the area. Troop members immediately began contacting local and national dog-related businesses. Members would keep in contact via email to relate the companies they were contacting so there would not be duplication of efforts. We created an excel spreadsheet to keep up with what companies had been contacted, what was promised and what was yet to be received. Troop members also alerted each other to bargains and specials they found.

We created a standard request letter that the troop members could use to provide to the various companies to explain who we are and what we were doing, then to ask for a donation.

The donations were tremendous. An area paper manufacturer donated a lot of large plain brown grocery bags (enough for our 2004 project, as well as 2005 and probably 2006!). Local pet businesses donated food, treats and toys. Troop members also contacted mail-order pet supplies and we took in donations for them as well. We learned that area stores donate bags of food that may have a tear in the package. They can't sell the bag in the store, but they are happy to donate the bags as the food is still good.



Members also collected coupons which allowed us to obtain additional bags of food at no cost. For example, we had a stack of Nature's Recipe \$5 off coupons. We watched the sales and when the 5 lb bags of food went on sale for \$4.99, we scooped up free bags with our coupons! Some people weren't comfortable asking for donations, so they would

donate money to the effort or hit the sales and the dollar stores for additional items. Members reported good deals from area stores like Target's \$1 section, good dog toy deals from Dollar General and Family Dollar. We also hit the dollar stores for large plastic canisters in order to be able to divide out the large bags of dog food donated.

We found out from our Meals on Wheels volunteer contact the number of dogs we would be providing for. At first the idea of creating gift bags for 108 dogs seemed like a large task, but as we watched the donations pour in, we realized these dogs were going to have a tremendous Christmas! One of our long-distance troop members was able to participate by sending us a whole box of paints, stamps, ribbons, Christmas & doggie scrap booking paper, etc. for us to use to decorate the brown bags. Another troop member provided a large room at her church for us to use as Gift Bag Central. Two computer savvy troop members created Christmas enclosure cards that showed a Santa-hat-adorned Sparky on the front, a Christmas wish from the troop inside, and thanks to our major company contributors on the back.



We coordinated a date with our Meals On Wheels contact and agreed on a Sunday afternoon that they would be able to bring the Meals On Wheels van out to pick up the bags. Our troop gathered at Gift Bag Central with all the donations, including over 600 lbs of dog food, over 400 dog toys and two tables full of biscuits and treats.



We set up a station for some members to work on dividing out the large bags of dog food into smaller containers. We set up tables for toys and tables for treats. We had tables set up with all the decorative supplies and members worked on decorating the grocery bags to make them Doggie-Christmassy. Once all the gift bags were decorated, then we started an assembly line. We filled each filled a bag at a time with a particular sized dog in mind. We chose toys, treats & food based on the size dog we had assigned for each bag. We noted in the corner of the bag the size dog it was for so the case workers could match the goodie bags with the appropriate sized dog. After about 2 hours of decorating and filling, we had 112 large gift bags filled to the brim. (We wanted to make a few extra, just in case someone miscounted!)



Meals on Wheels volunteers arrived with their van a short time afterward and we had a parade of loading the bags into the truck. The volunteers were overwhelmed, as were the clients at the receiving end. The bags were delivered with the regular meal delivery the first week of December. Each troop member who had received donations from local or mail-order companies sent a thank you note on the Christmas Sparky cards to thank them for their generous donations. Troop 119 is looking forward to making this event an annual troop project and have already begun working on this year's collections! We have found this to be a very rewarding, worthwhile community service project and encourage any other interested troops to contact their area Meals On Wheels organization and get the ball rolling!

