

Like a Santa Claus for dogs of the homeless, he travels miles, his cart loaded with food, blankets, medications and toys

Description

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Itâ??s a chilly January morning, and Paul Crowell is pulling a heavy steel wagon up a street in the Bayview. Itâ??s loaded with hundreds of pounds of pet food, animal medications, blankets and pet toys. He turns south on Selby Street, a desolate stretch of road under the elevated 280 freeway.

Heâ??s there to drop off sacks of dog food for three of his â??babies,â?• a trio of pit bulls owned by Amelia, a 34-year-old woman who has lived in a tiny blue trailer on that block for about two and a half years. â??Donâ??t get too close,â?• Crowell warns. But two of the dogs â?? Cookie and Mr. Duke â?? immediately nuzzle up to him as he slips them a handful of treats.



Paul Crowellâ??s donations are a big help to Amelia and her two pit bulls, Cookie and Mr. Duke. Below, she comforts Nyx, who was injured in a dog fight. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

A third dog, Nyx, is recovering from injuries suffered in a fight with her litter mates. Crowell soothes her and slips a doggie tranquilizer into a blob of peanut butter to help her calm down. He pulls a blanket from the cart and places Nyx on it. Before he leaves, he drops off 60 pounds of dry food, a bounty that will be consumed in about a week.



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Amelia, whose blond and black hair is styled into large ringlets, is dressed for winter with layers of black clothing under a plaid windbreaker. She greets Crowell warmly and said, â??Heâ??s incredibly helpful; it takes a big chunk of worry off my plate.â?•

She is one of more than 50 homeless people whose pets Crowell helps feed and care for. Most days he leaves his room on Harrison Street, loads his wagon and embarks on a winding, eight-mile trek from South of Market to the Bayview and Candlestick Point. He likes the exercise and can still handle the heavy lifting but admits that at 52, itâ??s taken a toll on his body. â??Iâ??m getting tired,â?• he said. â??Iâ??ve walked miles all my life. I go through a pair of boots every two months.â?•

Crowd funded

Crowell is the founder and one-man staff of Project Open Paw, a venture he started nearly 10 years ago. Heâ??s well known in homeless circles and his work has attracted attention in the broader community. The local CBS affiliate ran a story about him four years ago and honored him with its weekly Jefferson Award. His Facebook page has more than 4,700 followers and his GoFundMe account, which supports the project, has raised nearly $300,000 over the last decade. People also make donations, including his latest pair of boots, through his Amazon Wish list.



Honey, a pit bull owned by Gini, lines up for a meal. Crowell packs the dog food he buys, with his own or donated funds, into plastic bags for distribution.

â??But that money isnâ??t just sitting around,â?• he said of the GoFundMe account. The price of dog food and other supplies has soared in the last year. According to Crowell, a bag of dry food that was selling for $16 now goes for about $29. In a month when he doesnâ??t get donations of pet food and supplies, his out-of-pocket expenses run about $600, he estimates.

As youâ??d expect, Crowell, who grew up on Cape Cod, said heâ??s always loved dogs. When he moved to San Francisco 30 years ago, he started working at a kennel after stints as a bartender and

janitor. â??When dogs are boarded, they lose their appetite and I noticed how much food wasnâ??t getting eaten,â?• he said. Rather than let it go to waste, he started bagging it up and dropping it off at homeless encampments after work. â??It didnâ??t take long before I became known as the doggy food man and a bit of a dog guru to the folks out there.â?•

When the kennelâ??s owner stopped him from redistributing the leftovers, he started posting photos of dogs on Facebook as he fed them and asking for donations â?? and that was the birth of Project Open Paw.



Toys for Crowellâ??s â??kids.â?•

Crowell is about 6-foot tall, solidly built and bald with a full white beard that nearly reaches his chest. His sweatshirt has a message on the back: â??Making a Difference One Animal at a Time.â?• Heâ??s never been married and has no children. â??Dogs are my kids, I guess.â?•

These days, he works a few hours overnight at a South of Market kennel. His main job is to watch over the dogs and keep them calm. In exchange, he has a room upstairs and space for hundreds of pounds of dog food and supplies. He has a few rescue dogs of his own, animals whose owners are too sick to care for them.


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Crowell walks miles from his South of Market home to the industrial areas of the Bayview, pulling a cart loaded with food and items for dogs whose owners who do not have permanent housing.

A long haul

This morning, he rolls the wagon to Fourth Street and heads for the raised Muni platform about five blocks away. He manages to lift the wagon up onto a T-Line train and settles down as the streetcar rumbles along Third Street, passing Mission Bay and Dogpatch, neighborhoods that have gentrified and

lost much of their blue-collar, industrial base. â??So different,â?• Crowell said, shaking his head.



Jessie and his dog are looking for a new place to stay after the cityâ??s Department of Public Works bulldozed his former encampment during recent rain storms.

He gets off at Evans Street in the Bayview and heads for Phelps Street. The area still has a scrap yard and some warehouses, but west of Third Street no sign of consumer-focused business. Phelps is lined with dilapidated trailers, tents, and the detritus of people living on the street. The remnants of a charcoal fire can be seen under the flap of a tent.

A few locked-up dogs bark as he rolls by. â??They can smell the dog odors on my pants,â?• he said. â??No way I can sneak by them,â?• he jokes. No one is home at his first stop, but he drops off two freezer bags of dog food in a canoe thatâ??s sitting on blocks in front of a trailer. His knock at the next stop goes unanswered as well. â??When I donâ??t see the dogs for a few days I get sad. I know the guy; he has two Rottweilers, Bison and Cannabis.â?•

Keeping track of homeless people is a challenge. They move frequently and are hard to trace. Crowell spends much less time South of Market these days, because many of the formerly unhoused in that neighborhood have been moved into hotels.

Dog blogger

After his stops on Selby Street, Paul Crowell heads deeper into the Bayview and greets Roni. who is 38 and lives in a trailer in front of a van and storage business. Like a lot of the homeless in that area, she has an agreement with the building owners to act as night security, in exchange for being allowed

to park on the property.



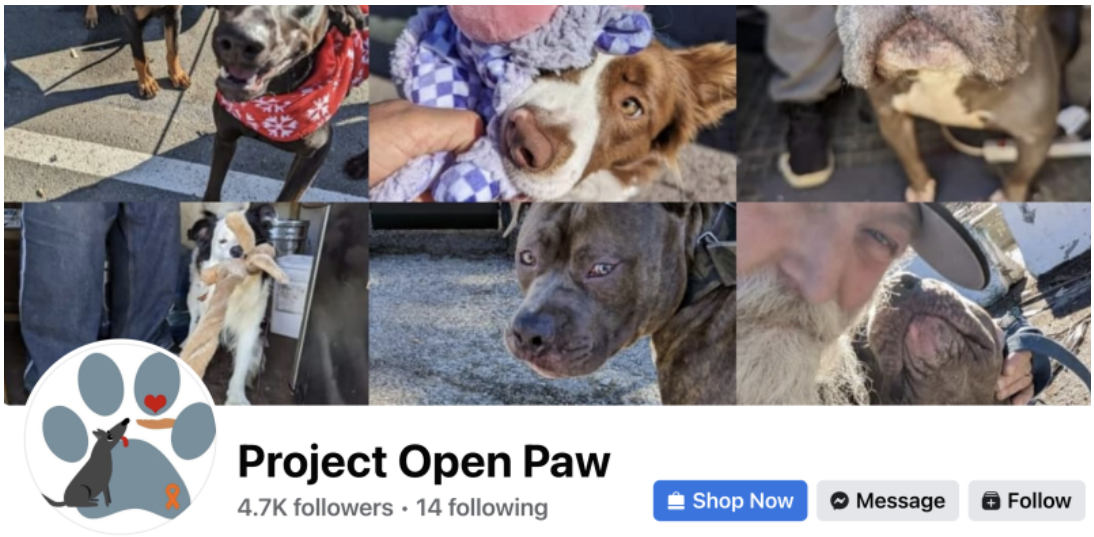
Crowell plays a bit of tug-of-war with Honey.

Crowell swings a trunk off the cart and opens it. Honey runs over, sticks her muzzle in and pulls out a dog toy and happily runs off. â??Paul is beyond helpful,â?• Roni said. Heâ??s taken Honey to the vet, a service he can only offer when heâ??s having a good money month, he explained. He carries syringes and doses of a vaccine for parvovirus, an infection that can be deadly to puppies.

Crowell is social-media savvy, using Facebook and Instagram to publicize Project Open Paw, sometimes posting lengthy descriptions of his latest â??run.â?• He writes about dog-related issues, like the recent case of Enzo, a dog shot and killed by Lodi police, and raises money for dogs like Bella, who needs critical dental surgery.



Crowell writes about his dog runs as well as other animal-related issues on Facebook and Instagram, where he promotes and raises money for Project Open Paw and Go-Fund-Me pleas for dogs needing more serious help.



The walking and lifting are becoming a bit much, but an electric wagon donated by a supporter has made things easier â?? he uses somedays instead of pulling his heavy cart â?? and it allows him to cover extra miles. Retirement is not on the agenda though he was considering it in the fall.

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â??This has become my whole life,â?• he said. â??I donâ??t know if I can live without it.â?•

Other resources:

- Pets of the Homeless offers emergency vet care. Call 775-841-7463.
- The Full Belly Bus holds food pantries twice a month at various locations in San Francisco.
- VETSOS provides vet services and makes weekly curbside delivery of free pet food and supplies in the Mission District by appointment. 415-355-2237.

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1. All Posts

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snyder