

Legislator would sever Husky from new plan

By Keith M. Phaneuf
Journal Inquirer

HARTFORD — A co-chairman of the legislature's Human Services Committee says it's time to separate Gov. M. Jodi Rell's troubled Charter Oak health plan from state's flagship health coverage for nearly 340,000 poor individuals.

Sen. Jonathan A. Harris, D-West Hartford, said that while he still hopes the administration can convince more hospitals and doctors to participate in Charter Oak, clients of the "Husky" program — who include more than 230,000 children — are being put at risk.

"I know there are more hospitals and providers out there that are willing to service Husky clients, but not Charter Oak," Harris said shortly before Rell met with Capitol reporters following Monday's State Bond Commission meeting. "There's too much at stake."

The Republican governor has taken heat from Harris' panel and from many other Democratic legislators for linking the two plans.

Husky, launched more than a decade ago, is an expansion of the state's Medicaid-funded health plan for low-income families. State government is expected to spend more than \$800 million this fiscal year providing coverage to nearly 339,000 clients.

Charter Oak is Rell's initiative to provide modest, affordable coverage to working adults who lack health insurance.

Approved by the legislature in June 2007 and launched last month, Charter Oak originally was planned to cover 8,000 individuals in its first year at a cost of \$13 million. Administration officials now are projecting more than 19,000 people will participate this fiscal year.

So far, the administration says, thousands of applications have been distributed and more than 200 people have been approved to join the plan.

The problem, Harris and other critics say, is the administration's decision to link the two programs.

The administration went out to bid and stipulated that any group looking to administer Husky also must run Charter Oak.

The three managed-care organizations, selected in May, are supposed to begin taking over that role in September, and to have all Husky and Charter Oak patients in their networks by January.

However, the administration has struggled to find doctors, hospitals, and other providers willing to participate in both programs.

Two of the companies involved — AmeriChoice-United Healthcare and Aetna Better Health — have just two of the state's 33 hospitals on their provider networks: They

A PLACE FOR ALL CREATURES



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Susan Linker, co-founder of Our Companions Domestic Animal Sanctuary in Bloomfield, holds Laura, a cat rescued from a case of hoarding that was recently placed with an adoptive family. Behind her is Willamina, a 10-year-old red-eared slider turtle rescued from neglect who is in need of a home.

Animal rescue group building a \$15 million sanctuary

By Stacy Jennings
For the Journal Inquirer

A Bloomfield group is building what its officials are touting as the state's first animal sanctuary of its kind in Ashford, a multi-million dollar facility on 43 acres that will include an animal rescue and training center, hiking trails, reflection gardens, and a dog park.

The facility, expected to cost an estimated \$15 million when it is completed over the next seven to eight years, is being constructed on land off Route 44 that was donated to the organization, Our Companions Domestic Animal Sanctuary of Bloomfield.

Our Companions already has cleared the existing buildings at the site and, based on funding goals, plans to begin construction on its first rescue cottage in January, says Susan Linker, co-founder and chief executive officer of the organization.

The sanctuary will eventually house cats, dogs, and small domestic animals. Our Companions intends to build 16 rescue cottages at the site, half for dogs and half for cats.

The cat cottages will each house 25 cats while the dog cottages will house each five dogs.

Linker says that what makes the sanctuary unique is its location in the country, with 30 of its 43 acres being used as a public park. Its rescue center's services will include spaying and neutering and pet education classes.

The sanctuary's design and approach to pet care is unique because animals will not be housed in cages but, rather, in cottages that will provide a home-like environment and rehabilitation, she says.

No-kill organization

Our Companions is a nonprofit, privately funded, no-kill organization that aids in the adoption of rescued animals.

Linker, who lives in Bloomfield, founded the organization in May 2002 with Marie Joiner of Union, who is its chief operating officer. Beforehand, Linker had worked in a traditional animal shelter for eight years and witnessed what she calls the unnecessary euthanization of

animals as a result of a lack of appropriate resources, such as an animal sanctuary.

Our Companions offers services such as dog training, pet consultations, community education, neutering and spaying, and vaccinations for feral cats. The organization has a staff of four, as well as 130 volunteers.

Linker believes that the destruction of animals can be avoided partially through education and neutering and spaying.

Currently, Our Companions does not have a shelter. However, the organization's Bloomfield-based office is housing several animals temporarily until homes are found.

Most of the animals it rescues are placed with foster families until permanent homes are found.

Linker says that when a family fosters an animal "our role is to guide them about doing it the right way." She estimated that foster families keep and adopt pets 30 percent of the time.

Last year Our Companions placed 491 animals with families, including cats, dogs, rabbits, hamsters, and birds. Linker said 80 percent of calls the organization receives have to do with cats.

As chief executive officer of Our Companions, Linker decided to organize the construction of the animal sanctuary in Ashford in order to make more resources available for animals in the area. The sanctuary will help to rehabilitate and find or provide a home for homeless animals.

Ashford land was donated

The land that Our Companions is using for its Ashford sanctuary was donated to the organization by Helping Paws, a cat rescue center based in Colchester. The land previously housed an industrial egg farm. Its former owners gave the property to Helping Paws.

The sanctuary is being constructed in three phases. The first phase was the demolition of structures that remained from the farm. The second phase is the construction of a 1,000-square-foot rescue cottage that will house 25 cats and five dogs.

The third and final phase will be the con-

struction of the sanctuary's 5,625-square-foot Pet Rescue Center. The center will be a multi-functional facility where neutering, spaying, dog training, and education will be available.

Pets who, for whatever reason, are unable to be adopted, will have the chance to live out their lives at the sanctuary. Linker estimated that a quarter of the sanctuary's population would live out their lives there.

However, she is careful to point out that the idea is to find homes for the animals, as opposed to keeping them at the facility.

Linker says it will take as long as seven to eight years to complete the work at the sanctuary because Our Companions needs time to both raise the funds for project and to grow operationally.

"Our organization is only five years old so not only do we need to raise \$15 million, but we need to expand our public support base so we can afford to operate the sanctuary in addition to our current programs and operations," she said.

So far, Our Companions has received a gift of \$100,000 toward the \$600,000 needed to build the first rescue cottage, she says.

On Friday, Aug. 15, a golf tournament will be held whose proceeds will benefit Our Companions. The 4th Annual Dogman Classic Golf Tournament, presented by John Gagnon's Pet Resort, will take place at the Blackledge Country Club in Hebron.

The cost is \$500 per foursome and the deadline for registration is Thursday, Aug. 14.

To register for the tournament and for more information about Our Companions, contact Linker at 242-9999 or via e-mail at susanl@ourcompanions.org

You can also visit the Our Companions Web site at

www.ourcompanions.org

Donations to the organization may be made through the Web site or by sending them to Our Companions Domestic Animal Sanctuary, P.O. Box 673, Bloomfield, CT, 06002.

To reach Our Companions' Animal Assistance Helpline, call 242-9999, ext. 6.