

# Therapy dogs take front seat in health care

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*Asbury Solomons resident Patricia “Pat” Haynie pets Sky, the dog of Sharon Stapf, Southern Maryland Pets on Wheels coordinator, during a visit last week.*

According to Pets on Wheels in Southern Maryland, more than half of all nursing home residents have no relationships with their relatives, and 5 percent receive visits less than once a week. For nearly 50 years, specially trained therapeutic dogs have been used in clinical and school settings to socially interact with adults and children to help them feel better both emotionally and physically. Therapy dogs help create three-way bonds among the resident, the pet and the volunteer.

“Hospitals are now starting to use the term animal-assisted therapy in the health care field, and they are doing a lot of studies in the therapeutic dog visitation realm,” said Sharon Stapf, Southern Maryland coordinator for Pets on Wheels. “Studies show that patients with autism, [post-traumatic stress disorder] and Alzheimer’s will respond to the pets in way that they would not respond to a person.”

Pets on Wheels is a nonprofit volunteer organization that provides friendly visits from volunteers and their pets to those requiring the support of an institutional setting. The program uses therapy dogs to provide affection and comfort to people in hospitals, nursing homes, schools, hospices, facilities for the physically and mentally challenged, people with learning difficulties and stress-free zones at local colleges during exam time.

“We’ve even been asked to do a lot of colleges during exam week because they found it decreases stress, improves test scores and decreases the risk of suicide,” Stapf said.

Studies show that spending time with a therapy dog lessens pain, lowers blood pressure and decreases levels of stress while increasing levels of feel-good hormones. Petting a dog can help improve patients’ sensory and fine motor skills and trigger the release of endorphins, which ease discomfort.

Clara Palmer, 91, patient at Sagepoint Gardens assisted living in La Plata, said it makes her happy to have the therapy dogs visit the assisted living home every week.

“I would love it if they can come visit every day,” she said.

Pets on Wheels predominantly has a lot of golden retrievers such as Cynthia Cunningham’s therapy dog, Tucker. Stapf said golden retrievers don’t mind being petted and touched for two hours at a time by 20 or more people and are pleasant, well-mannered, friendly dogs who have a knack and ability to receive love.

Cunningham and Tucker visit St. Mary’s Adult Day Care Center in Hollywood every Friday. Cunningham said Tucker loves interacting with all of the patients. Tucker knows the people who are excited about him, as well as those who are hesitant and need a calmer approach.

“Both therapy dogs and the patients bring a sense of joy to each other,” Cunningham said.

“I really wish that more people in the medical field would realize how much therapy dogs’ work would benefit patients,” she said. “When Tucker sits around with the patients, there’s no judgment. He’s not asking for anything and that sense of pressure is not there and they can be themselves.”

Pets on Wheels volunteers and nursing home staff have concluded that even the most depressed and withdrawn residents will eventually respond to an animal’s attention. They wait expectantly for the team to arrive and frequently will remember the pet’s name.

Sarah Goshorn, a client at St. Mary’s Adult Day Care Center, said Tucker is good with people and everyone loves petting him. “I’m also a diabetic, and when things go wrong with my health, I feel better when I see Tucker,” she said. “He is a sweet, kind, and loving dog.”

Dawn Adkins, activities coordinator at the center, said when Cunningham emailed her about bringing Tucker to visit the patients, the staff was ecstatic. Adkins said having therapy dogs like

Tucker around lifts the spirit of participants who are older and have disabilities such as dementia or Alzheimer's, or are mentally challenged.

“Having Tucker here brings the participants back to life,” Adkins said. “These animals are changing the health care field because it's very therapeutic. A lot of people either live alone or live in group homes, but it's good to see them interacting with something that brings them joy. I just think it's a very good program and I support it 100 percent.”

Therapy dogs are not the same as service dogs. Both have different guidelines. Service dogs are working for an individual, so anything that person needs medically, emotionally or physically, they are doing for that one person. No one can touch or interact with service dogs because they get distracted by what they are doing for that particular person.

Therapy dogs are the total opposite.

“A therapy dog's job is to get petted for a living, which is not a job if you're a dog,” Stapf said. “When they put that shirt on, they say dogs don't recognize color, but they certainly recognize that shade of blue shirts, and they start circling to try to get you to the door because they like their job. They like what they do and they love doing it,” Stapf said.

Kelly Augustine is one of Pets on Wheels active Calvert County volunteers. She and her pet, Izzy, visit patients at Calvert Hospice and University of Maryland students.

“I think it's another area of therapy, and I have noticed how it can seem to take people's stress away, and people are obviously less uncomfortable in the time that they are interacting with Izzy,” Augustine said.

Residents who are depressed or uncommunicative typically become enthusiastic and talkative in the presence of therapy dogs. Visits by a volunteer and their therapy dog relieves the boredom that many residents face each day, especially those unable to leave their beds or rooms to participate in other activities.

“Asbury Solomons is very fortunate to enjoy a wonderful relationship with Pets on Wheels,” said Dennis Poremski, director of wellness at the assisted living home in Calvert. “Having the many beautiful pets from the volunteers at Pets on Wheels visit regularly has an enormous impact on the lives of those who live [and work] in this community. I'm always amazed and gratified at how people react to a visit from a pet — faces light up, smiles widen, conversations begin, and friendships develop. Pets and their volunteers bring a simple and incredibly valuable warmth, calm, joy and brightness to so many peoples' days. Asbury Solomons is very grateful to every pet and owner who gives of their time here and in Southern Maryland as a whole.”

Barbara Peters, Therapy Dog 101 trainer, trains therapy dogs all over Southern Maryland, including many of the pet volunteers who are a part of Pets on Wheels in Southern Maryland.

“As a dog trainer I make sure that the handler and the dog are comfortable being petted all over. I also teach them how to approach patients that might be in wheelchairs and the protocol when

visiting patients and residents at libraries, hospitals and schools, specifically colleges,” Peters said.

Peters said therapy dogs are important because they bring comfort and companionship to whomever they are around.

“They do such wonderful work,” Peters said. “I have seen where a patient was having their blood pressure taken and their blood pressure is normally high but when I bring my dog around, you can actually see the blood pressure decrease.”

Pets on Wheels continues to “talk, bark, and meow” its way into the lives of thousands of Southern Maryland residents. Stapf said more people are seeing more use for therapy dogs and envisions an exponential expansion of therapy dog programs in the future, especially geared toward at-risk youth. The program also features horses, cats and a tortoise who help take animal assisted therapy above and beyond.