



FACILITY-SPONSORED PET THERAPY AND COMPANION PROGRAMS

Many senior living facilities are utilizing pet therapy and companion programs for their residents, which involve the permanent placement or regular visitation of dogs or cats, as well as birds, fish, or rabbits. Research of these programs indicates several benefits for the elderly, including combating loneliness, encouraging nurturing behaviors, socialization, mental stimulation, and even lowering blood pressure due to a calming effect. Over the years, pet therapy and companion programs have received such wide acclaim that the observance of pets in senior living facilities has become commonplace throughout the country.

However, not every resident wants to have a pet in his or her environment; and some residents have conditions, such as allergies or asthma, that may deter them from physical contact. Allergic reactions to cat dander or saliva can cause problems that are manifested by symptoms of cough, wheezing, rhinitis, asthma, conjunctivitis, and skin reactions.

Before initiating a pet therapy or companion program, providers should determine which residents are allergic, do not like pets, are afraid of them, or simply feel that pets belong outside. Those residents should be shielded from physical contact when the pets are nearby, whether temporarily or permanently.

The following are some guidelines to help protect your residents and facility when sponsoring a pet therapy and companion program.

- Review your insurance coverage to ensure that any animal related incidents are covered. Likewise, people bringing pets in should be required to have adequate coverage.
- Identify and obtain operating funds to pay for grooming costs, food and veterinary expenses prior to the initiation of the program.

- Follow your state's Department of Health Guidelines for visiting animals. Develop a complete set of policies and procedures for the program, including the overall supervision of the program, requirements for vaccinations, feeding and water access, hygiene protocols for all residents and staff that touch the animal, litter removal and responses to potential elopement of the animal, as well as any injuries or allergic reactions attributed to the pet. Additionally, policies should restrict the visitation of certain pets, such as snakes and loud barking dogs. Finally, provide adequate staff, resident, and family education and orientation prior to initiating the program.
- For visiting pets, use individuals or agencies that have undergone adequate training and can make routine visits so residents can build a relationship with the pet and volunteer. Make copies of their certification papers, insurance and identification for your files in case there is ever a problem. Be sure to orient the volunteer to the policies and procedures in effect prior to the pet's visit.
- Ensure that the volunteer knows which residents want to be visited and which do not. A staff member should accompany the volunteer and make sure he or she is not distracted when the pet is with a resident. The pet should never be left alone; if the volunteer needs to visit the restroom, the pet should go with him or her.
- For live-in pets, use certified agencies to purchase or adopt them. Animals should not be less than one year old and they should come with a detailed history as an abusive past can make their behavior unpredictable. Ensure that the animal is spayed or neutered as well.
- Do not allow just any pet to enter your facility. Instead, evaluate the pet's behavior to ensure that the animal is trained, non-aggressive, adaptable to new environments and enjoys meeting people. Several organizations, such as the American Kennel Club, Therapy Dogs International and the Delta Society offer tests and checklists to use when evaluating pets' behaviors.
- Animals should be clean and free of fleas and other pests. If they have claws, it is recommended that they are clipped short to avoid skin tears. Pets should be certified that they are healthy and up to date on all required shots. Zoonosis is the transmission of diseases or parasites from animals to humans. Pets can carry several potential pathogens, such as *Capnocytophaga canimorsus* (causes infection if bit), Q fever, bartonellosis ("cat scratch fever"), toxoplasmosis (cats are the definitive host), psittacosis (primarily seen in birds), toxocariasis (dog or cat ringworm), and rabies, although very rarely.
- All animal records should be kept on file and updated annually. This includes vaccination records, health certificates and a copy of the veterinary license.
- Select a key responsible staff member (and alternate) on every shift to oversee that the pet's needs are met and that it's properly cared for. Pets should be excluded from food service and preparation areas and medical supply areas.
- Residents should be given hand wipes after petting the animals and volunteers should wash their hands before leaving the facility.
- One of the best resources available to help facilities establish a pet therapy and companion program is the book *Life Worth Living* by William H. Thomas, M.D. In the book, Dr. Thomas provides the following insights concerning specific pets.

Dogs

- Introduce the dog to the facility with a series of short visits on a leash. Gradually lengthen the visits until the dog is ready to “move in.” Provide a safe and secure place off the beaten path for the dog to retreat to for naps and time-out. A secure wire mesh crate with a padded floor makes an ideal dog retreat.
- Provide the dog with daily exercise by scheduling time in a dog run adjacent to the facility. In addition, both staff and ambulatory residents will enjoy walking the dog. Use a retractable leash that is easy to use and decreases the risk for entanglement.
- Secure brushes and tools for grooming and allow residents to help, as desired and able.
- The dog’s prescribed diet should be strictly adhered to, as its greatest health risk is obesity from kind-hearted individuals (both residents and staff) always wanting to feed it. Distribute a rationed amount of dog biscuits to persistent offenders.

Cats

- It is best to select an “in door” cat to control diet and decrease health problems.
- The litter box should have a hood and be placed in an inconspicuous spot that is always accessible to the cat. Develop scheduled re-filling and cleaning policies as appropriate.

Birds

- Birds should be restricted to cages or aviaries and purchased from a licensed dealer. Preferred birds for birdcages include parakeets, cockatiels and lovebirds.
- Birdcages should be large enough for the wings to spread fully without touching the sides and the bird should be able to fly within the space. Perches should not be placed over food or water as droppings in water can cause illness. The cage should be placed where it is free from drafts and can receive sunlight indirectly. It should never be placed over a heater or radiator, and it should be hung at eye level, if possible.
- Aviaries can be contracted for sale and maintenance. They should contain enough materials for perches, feeding stations and nests. Some preferred birds for aviaries include: finches and canaries.
- Never give human food to birds. Check for signs of illness while changing food and water and seek medical attention as indicated. Signs include: shivering, tail bobbing up or down, crusty or runny noses, and ruffled feathers.
- Develop scheduled cage-cleaning policies and always spray sinks with a disinfectant afterwards.
- If birds get out of a cage, use a glove or a towel to handle them, as birds may bite.

Source for this article:

Thomas, W. H. (1996). *Life Worth Living*. Acton, MA: VanderWyk & Burnham.

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