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## Pet therapy can benefit senior living residents

### Health Care: Senior Living

by [Molly Dill](#) | October 15, 2018, 2:00 AM

<https://www.biztimes.com/2018/industries/healthcare-wellness/pet-therapy-can-benefit-senior-living-residents/>

A number of scientific studies have shown the use of pet therapy has a measurable positive impact on heart rate, blood pressure and depression and anxiety, particularly among the elderly.

As a result, senior living facilities are increasingly integrating pets into their enrichment activities for residents.

Pets Helping People Inc., a nonprofit that helps dog owners train their pets for visits to the elderly, is even based within a senior living facility, Congregational Home in Brookfield.

“Our primary focus is to assess and to train owners and their dogs to go out into the community,” said Amy Dodge, executive director of Pets Helping People. “We have our 20th year this year. Each year, we graduate probably between 30 and 40 handler teams.”

Congregational Home has assisted living, independent living and memory care wings, and Pets Helping People does its training throughout the residential community, Dodge said.

PHP uses Congregational Home’s activity center, boardroom and classroom to conduct assessments, orientation and bedside training for pets and their trainers, said Cindy Conkey, director of activities at Congregational Home.

Once PHP trainees are finished training, they often begin doing visits to Congregational Home residents, she said. The facility also allows residents’ family and friends to bring in their pets, so there are usually two to three pet visits on the calendar each week.

“We do a ‘Hug a Pup’ program here with our staff and their furry friends,” Conkey said. “We’re encouraging family and friends to bring in their pets at any given time as long as we have updated records.”

Because it’s able to directly apply lessons on-site, PHP conducts a unique four-week, hands-on class with its students and their pets, Dodge said.

“We go into the community and meet with the residents, and then go back into our classroom and debrief – what worked, what didn’t work,” she said.



Karen Corlyn and her dog, Mitzvah, visit Adult Day Services of Southeast Wisconsin LLC in West Allis.

Once a student graduates from PHP with a final test, he or she must show proof of a \$1 million insurance policy covering the animal, and then is free to begin visiting area senior living facilities with which PHP has relationships.

“We are only in southeast Wisconsin, but we do cover as far as up to Manitowoc, over to Madison and down to the border,” Dodge said. “We have about 185 active teams.”

When new residents join the Congregational Home community, the intake questionnaire reveals whether they have an aversion to dogs, and staff takes note of that when a pet is visiting, Conkey said.

In the pet therapy world, bringing dogs to meet with people in a therapeutic manner is called an Animal-Assisted Interaction, Dodge said. The trainer always asks if it’s alright to approach a resident, and the dogs are trained to be very obedient of the “stay” and “leave it” commands so they don’t eat medications that may fall on the floor or go where they shouldn’t.

“You always encounter different types of meetings,” Dodge said. “Some people will be less responsive, some people will be very sad or very excited. We advocate for the owners to be the representative of their dogs.”

There are some encounters that leave the trainers, staff and residents emotional, she said. Sometimes, a resident will be despondent and the dog lights them up and increases their socialization.

“We call them goosebump moments. The dog and to a degree, the handler, it’s a non-judging (interaction),” Dodge said. “There’s no set agenda, the person is interacting with the dog and the handler and it’s just canine love. It doesn’t work for all residents because obviously not all people are dog people.”

Conkey said there could be liability in any situation, but in the time she’s been at Congregational Home, there’s only been one minor incident with a dog. It’s one of several animal interactions the facility offers for its residents, including an aquarium and an aviary.

“Residents, how they react to animals is amazing,” Conkey said. “If anyone’s ever having a bad day, they certainly make your day better. Your overall wellbeing and your health is just so enhanced by having these things in place.”



Ute Pagel and her dog, Milo, visit Clement Manor in Greenfield.

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