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PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Animal Assistance for Seniors

Recreational Initiatives for Seniors ¹

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Animal-assisted therapy is gaining acceptance in health care and other institutional settings as a useful component of care and treatment processes. Owning a pet can potentially influence health and wellbeing. Pet ownership and animal assisted therapy has been associated with a range of health outcomes including lower blood pressure and reduced stress. The health benefits from owning or interacting with animals has also been shown to be independent of socio-economic factors such as age and gender.

Animal-assisted therapy programmes typically involve dogs and their owners. However, cats, rabbits and birds are sometimes used for therapy. While dogs of all sizes and breeds are welcomed as therapy dogs, having the right temperament and personality is essential. Animals are usually assessed to determine their health, temperament and personality

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

before being accepted as volunteers. The ability to stay calm in unfamiliar places and with unfamiliar people is essential for a good therapy animal. Thus, only dogs that are sufficiently obedient, sociable and gentle are accepted as therapy animals.

Box 1 introduces the characteristics of the two main types of animal-assisted programmes.

Box 1: Characteristics of Animal-Assisted Programmes

Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA)

- Involves dogs (or cats) who meet specific criteria
- Provides opportunities for education or recreation to enhance quality of life through human-dog interaction
- Delivered by trained professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers
- Sessions involve pets and their handlers visiting people in homes and institutions
- Sessions are generally casual and styled as “meet and greet” activities
- Length and content of visits vary and depend on the quality of the interaction between the patient and therapy animal

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT or Pet Therapy)

- Goal-directed, structured programme

that is individually tailored to a patient

- Delivered by trained professionals as part of an intervention to achieve specific therapeutic goals in physical, social, emotional or cognitive functioning
- Process is documented and evaluated

Source: Healing Paws,
<http://sosd.org.sg/community-outreach/healing-paws/>, Accessed 17 January 2017.

Globally, there are numerous programmes that bring together animal lovers, pets and older adults. The following cases cover a sample of programmes in the Asia-Pacific region.

Singapore Police Force K-9 Unit – Singapore

In addition to their day jobs as crime-fighters detecting drugs or explosives, the dogs in the K-9 crew spend their free time volunteering at senior homes. Since 2012, the K-9 crew dogs and their handlers have been visiting residents at the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick.

The programme originally began with four dogs and a handler. It was expanded after it received an overwhelmingly positive response from residents of the Home. In addition to affecting residents, the visits help to strengthen bonds between the officers and

their dogs, and to build a positive image of the K-9 crew in the community.

Both the dogs and the Home's residents benefit from the interaction. The residents feel uplifted, smiling as they pet, play and walk the dogs. Also, the attention and affection that residents lavish on the dogs contributes to the dogs' wellbeing, as they usually have limited contact with people other than their handlers.

Encouraged by the success of their programme, the K-9 Crew may expand its community outreach to include other organisations such as children's homes.

Healing Paws by SoSD – Singapore

Healing Paws began in January 2014 with a goal to provide comfort and warmth to people in need. This animal-assisted activity programme started with monthly sessions at Assisi Hospice. It has since been expanded to include several institutions such as Lions Home for the Elders and Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital.

Interested pet owners and their dogs can apply to become Healing Paws volunteers. Dogs that enjoy interacting with new people and understand basic commands are accepted as volunteers. Each dog undergoes an assessment by Healing Paws advisor Maureen Huang, a certified Animal Assisted Therapist.

Successful applicants participate in regular one-hour visits to selected homes. Volunteers and their dogs interact and play with residents of the homes in a spontaneous manner. Alternatively, there is a more structured 12-week programme where residents learn about the dogs and how to interact and bond with them. The institutions are not charged for the sessions, which are provided to them as a free service.

Therapy Dogs Singapore – Singapore

Therapy Dogs Singapore (TDS) was established in 2004 by a group of dog owners who were passionate about sharing the comfort and affection of their canine companions. The non-profit organisation aims to serve the community through pet-assisted therapy.

To date, the organisation has 118 human and 120 dog volunteers, and makes about 150 visits per year to nine adopted homes. Adopted homes include nursing homes like SWAMI and Thong Teck Home for Senior Citizens. TDS also conducts animal-assisted therapy programmes with physiotherapy and occupational therapy components.

Human volunteers are expected to commit to at least 4 visits in 6 months and to at least one specific institution. Canine volunteers come

in many sizes and must be at least a year old. To determine whether potential dog volunteers are suitable to work with a wide range of people in various environments, their temperaments are assessed.

The role of the canines in animal-assisted therapies differs depending on the therapeutic objective. The canines are used as ‘ice-breakers’ and enable human volunteers to initiate conversations with residents and to build friendships with residents over time. During the one-hour visits, residents might walk the dogs, throw weighted toys in a game of fetch, brush the dogs’ fur, or feed the dogs.

Dr Dog by Animals Asia – Hong Kong

Dr Dog is a programme based in China. The programme aims to provide animal-assisted therapy and to eliminate the dog and cat meat trade in the region. It was established in 1991 and has since trained over 1,000 canines as certified therapy dogs. Dr Dog also provides training to animal welfare groups in Taiwan, the Philippines, India, Japan and Malaysia. The focus of the training is about providing advice to the groups about how to run their own programmes.

Dr Dog arranges for registered therapy dogs to make regular visits to institutions, such as hospitals and long-term care facilities for the

elderly, in Hong Kong and three Chinese cities: Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Chengdu. The programme hopes to eliminate the trade in dog meat by demonstrating to residents the important contribution that dogs make to human society.

Recently, Animals Asia received funding from the Link Together Initiatives charity and community programme. Between October 2015 and September 2016, the sponsorship provided for over 100 visits by Dr Dog to elderly homes in Hong Kong, benefiting more than 500 residents.

Japanese Animal Hospital Association – Japan

The Japanese Animal Hospital Association (JAHA) provides animal-assisted therapy and research on the human-animal bond. The animal-assisted therapy programme – Companion Animal Partnership Program (CAPP) – began in 1986 and involves a collaboration with veterinarians and pet owners to bring animal companionship to hospitals, nursing homes and schools. By the end of 2016, the organisation had made 18,281 visits with the help of 139,697 human volunteers, 104,984 canine volunteers, and 21,805 feline volunteers.

JAHA sets safety guidelines for both human and animal volunteers. Animals are required

to undergo periodic medical checks and be carefully cleaned before participating in any activities. The organisation is insured for accidents during the visits, but fortunately, has never experienced any mishaps. To gain more formal recognition for animal therapy, JAHA started collecting data on the effects of the therapy in 2006 with the support of a government subsidy. The data includes tallies of smiles, eye contact, petting and length of interaction with the pets during a set time period.

At a typical session, human volunteers arrive with dogs and sometimes cats. They provide recreational activities as part of CAPP. The dogs interact with seniors by shaking paws and performing tricks. At one visit to the “silver floor” of a Tokyo clinic, the animals managed to elicit smiles and positive feedback from the senior patients, who shared how the session soothed their mind and that they had been looking forward to seeing the animals.

Delta Therapy Dogs by Delta Society – Australia

Delta Society’s dog therapy programme is the largest of its kind in Australia. It boasts more than 1000 volunteers and their dogs, who make regular visits to over 850 facilities including aged care and dementia facilities. An estimated 20,000 Australians benefit from

the Delta Therapy Dogs programme in hospitals and care facilities every week.

All applicants undergo a police check and complete a training seminar before they become volunteers. The training covers topics like occupational health and safety, facility procedures and policies, human health and communication and animal behaviour and training. The dogs undergo temperament testing, and have to be vaccinated and treated regularly for worms and fleas.

Once they have successfully completed the training, the human and dog teams make regular weekly or fortnightly visits to a specific facility in their local area. Facilities can request for more than one team to visit, or to change the team if they feel they are not a good match. Each session lasts 60-90 minutes, and teams visit residents in their rooms or in common areas. Delta Society requests that facilities make a small AUD600 (~SGD644) donation for each visiting Therapy Dog team.

At an aged care facility run by Arcare, two dogs visit about 10-12 residents once a week. The visits have helped to reduce depression and facilitate reminiscence and interaction. Staff shared how some residents had to leave their pets when moving to the facility, and the dogs helped to spark fond memories of home.

Sources:

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