



Ella Bittel of North Central Phoenix and her dog, Samson, visit patient Rick Farrell at Hospice of the Valley's Coronado Home in Phoenix (submitted photo).

'Pet therapy' is a growing trend

By Teri Carnicelli

The elderly man's anxious eyes turn toward the front window as he hears the sound of a car door closing outside the group home. Due to a variety of physical infirmities, he can't get up to greet his visitors but he can already feel his mood elevating and his excitement growing. When the door finally opens, it's not the woman standing there who draws his eyes, but the happy smile and wagging tail of Samson.

Samson and his owner, Ella Bittel, have been a volunteer pet therapy team with Hospice of the Valley since December 2010. Bittel expressed that volunteering with HOV gives her "the joy of seeing Samson bring his joy and love to others in a situation where it can make a difference, even if just for a few moments at a time."

She recently added a second dog to her household, a Papillon named Willie, who also is a certified pet therapy dog. They rotate their turns when visiting HOV's Coronado Home in Phoenix.

A pet therapy dog is trained to provide affection and comfort to people in retirement homes, hospitals, schools, and other places where people benefit from

the pet-to-human connection. For years, animal-assisted therapy has existed as a form of treatment to improve a patient's social, emotional, or cognitive functioning, as well as having health benefits like lowering blood pressure and raising endorphin levels, which can reduce physical pain.

Hospice of the Valley currently works with more than 190 volunteer pet therapy teams that operate wherever HOV's patients are—at home, in group care homes, in skilled nursing facilities, and any other locations where the facilities will admit the teams.

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Each patient will generally see the same pet therapy team, which helps the patient and his or her caregiver(s) develop a bond with the animal. "They get to know the habits of the dog, what commands it answers to, what treats it enjoys," explains Charis Williams, HOV's program manager for the Pet Connections Program.

Patients can interact as much or as little with the therapy animal as they like. "We have a lot of patients that like to brush them," Williams laughs.

HOV does its best to match a patient's preferences with a volunteer team, whether large dog, small dog—or a cat. Cats, Williams admits, are their biggest challenge. "We do have some wonderful cats in the program, but there are just a few," she says. "With cats, it's more about their natural personality versus training." In other words, it's either a mellow, friendly cat, or it's not.

HOV is always looking for more volunteer pet therapy teams, particularly to cover the summer months when many of its winter visitor teams head to cooler climates. "Our patients still want to be visited in the summertime," she points out.

Two upcoming orientations for HOV's Pet Connections Program are open to volunteers who already have an accepted national pet therapy registration. The orientations are scheduled for 6-9 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday, May 1-24, and 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m. every Friday and Saturday, June 15-23 at Hospice of the Valley's central office, 1510 E. Flower St. Space is limited, early registration is recommended. To register, call 602-636-6336. If you do not have a national pet therapy regis-



Lacey, a certified pet therapy dog that works exclusively with clients of Cypress HomeCare Solutions, recently celebrated her first birthday (submitted photo).

tration, contact Pet Connections at 602-530-6941 for additional information or e-mail ckwilliams@hov.org.

Other established organizations that work with the elderly or seriously ill have added similar pet therapy programs to their menu of services over the years.

Laura Blank, a phoenix resident, in partnership with Phoenix Baptist Hospital, began a pet therapy program in February 2010. Blank is a tester and observer for Therapy Dogs Inc., a national organization that certifies therapy dogs, and hospital volunteers. Blank initiated the program at Phoenix Baptist Hospital following her breast cancer treatment in an effort to give back to the people who saved her life.

Blank currently visits twice a month with her poodle. The team visits patients in the Progressive Care Unit at Phoenix Baptist Hospital on Monday

mornings. Blank hopes to expand the program to reach more critically ill patients throughout the hospital. She believes the short amount of time patients spend with therapy dogs help aid in the healing process.

In 2011, more than 800 patients at Phoenix Children's Hospital were visited by volunteer pets—which include 45 dogs and one cat—through the Animal-Assisted Therapy Program. Pet therapy dogs help young patients with rehabilitation and provide the unconditional love that only a dog can. The Animal-Assisted Therapy Program at Phoenix Children's is funded solely through donations.

Nicknamed "the Miracle Lab," Lacey, a golden Labrador, is a recent addition to the services provided by Cypress HomeCare Solutions to its clients. Founded by the Roth family in 1994, Cypress HomeCare Solutions in Central Phoenix provides homecare services to aging seniors or families with loved ones who are chronically ill or disabled.

When she was 10 weeks old, Lacey was adopted by Bob Roth, managing partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions. Roth knew immediately that Lacey had an exceptionally big heart and a special gift for caregiving, and he knew firsthand from his years providing homecare the benefits of a pet and how much interactions with a pet can lift ones spirits. Roth enrolled Lacey in the therapy dog-training program through Animal Actors of Arizona to become a certified pet therapy dog.

Lacey, who recently celebrated her first birthday, is a natural when it comes to making anyone feel better, Roth says.

Lacey's visits are complimentary for Cypress HomeCare Solutions clients. For more information, call 602-264-8009 or visit cypresshomecare.com.