

Patients comforted by four-legged volunteers

BY ANGELA GONZALES | *Phoenix Business Journal*

Volunteers come in all shapes and sizes, including some with four legs, furry faces and wagging tails. Pet therapy in Arizona has become all the rage in hospitals and now these delightful dogs are working their way into the home care industry.

Bob Roth, managing partner of Phoenix-based Cypress HomeCare Solutions LLC, welcomed Lacey to his staff last fall. The yellow Labrador retriever's job is to provide her own brand of therapy to Cypress clients.

Adding pet therapy to Cypress' line of services was a natural extension, Roth said.

"The focus is to go to clients' homes who can no longer raise pets on their own," Roth said. "They love when she comes by for visits."

There are no extra charges for Lacey's visits, he said. "She just brightens up people's day," Roth said.

Pet therapy in hospitals is the norm today. It's been in Valley hospitals for about a dozen years.

Linda Llewellyn, director of volunteer services for John C. Lincoln Health Network in Phoenix, remembers in the late 1990s when hospital administrators were reluctant to allow animals in hospitals. Administrators worried about infection risks and how patients might perceive dogs in a hospital environment.

"It wasn't widely done," she said.

But in 2000, after staffers reported a drop in the blood pressures of cardiovascular patients after visits from friendly canines, administrators allowed creation of a pilot pet therapy program in the cardiovascular ICU.

By 2001, the pet therapy program was expanded to both JCL hospitals.

Today, JCL has 30 pet therapy teams across the network. "It's almost their dogs' calling," Llewellyn said of the pet owners. "There was something unique and special they observed in their dog who drove the whole purpose in doing it."

She welcomes more teams to join the program.

"We fully support the program and know the joy and benefit it brings to those they come in contact with,"



PROVIDED BY CYPRESS HOME CARE SOLUTIONS LLC

Lacey the Labrador retriever visits with patient Fran Geller.

Llewellyn said. "We would love to be able to provide that to more people."

The furry therapists range in size from Shirley Giles' bichon frise named Chrissey Snow to Elizabeth Kapash's Great Dane named Windy.

Giles is a breast cancer survivor who had been volunteering at JCL's breast cancer center before she decided to get Chrissey Snow certified to as a pet therapist. She said she enjoys seeing patients' eyes light up when they get a visit from Chrissey Snow.

"When she's around the house, she acts like a puppy, but when she's at the hospital, she acts like a big girl and gives them as much love as she possibly can," Giles said.

Kapash has been volunteering at JCL with Windy for three years. Before that, Windy's dad, Skyler, had been a

pet therapist at JCL for four years.

She remembers one day when Skyler had finished his rounds and they were headed down the elevator down to the main entrance when a security guard asked if Skyler might be able to calm an agitated woman in the lobby.

"She was walking around like she was ready to explode," Kapash said. "She was very angry about a procedure that went wrong."

The minute the woman saw Skyler she threw her arms around his neck and started crying.

"I've seen children stop screaming and old ladies cry," she said. "It's great."

West Valley Hospital started its pet therapy program in September 2008, working with Therapy Paws, a nonprofit organization, said Dawn Gielau, director of volunteer and retail services at the hospital.

"Whenever those working pets come through our front doors, I can't describe the feeling that folks have," she said. "They gravitate to the pet. When you're here, you're worried, concerned and frightened. When a warm, friendly therapy dog appears at your door they can offer a bit of a distraction throughout your day. It always seems to be a wonderful experience."

Jean Reynolds, president of Therapy Paws and a West Valley Hospital volunteer, said it took her three years to implement the pet therapy program there.

Every time she was ready to present the program to the hospital's board, the hospital would change volunteer coordinators and she would have to start over.

She finally got the program up and running on Sept. 11, 2008. She also started a Therapy Paws program at Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Goodyear and the Avondale Police Department. Today Therapy Paws has 20 teams volunteering at seven facilities in the West Valley.

Reynolds, a finalist in this year's Health Care Heroes Awards, and her Australian shepherd Nelli spend most of their time volunteering at CTCA.

"I always wanted to have a therapy dog and volunteer," she said.



A patient at John C. Lincoln Hospital's Mendy's Place plays with Shirley Giles' bichon frise therapy dog, Chrissey Snow.

PROVIDED BY JOHN C. LINCOLN HOSPITAL