



CANINE TIME

during visitation therapy provides cherished moments
between older New Jerseyans and their four-legged guests

BY DEBRA STEVKO MILLER

Sometimes it's nice to have a friend over for a visit — even one you've never met before.

The bond can be instantaneous or take several meetings, but the benefit of the interaction can't be denied. It's about two friends meeting weekly, but it's difficult to tell who looks forward to it more — Kathy, a nursing home resident, or canine Toby and his handler Karen.

Visitation therapy for senior citizens allows the elderly to experience the benefits of having a pet without the responsibility. Those who are in hospitals, nursing homes, adult day centers or are homebound qualify for these programs, which can enhance their quality of life.

"(The dogs) become like their own pets, and volunteers become like their family," explained Danielle Maley of Caregiver Canines in Toms River. "The one-on-one is just so valuable. It's that unconditional love, it really is. You don't have to say anything, you don't have to be on your best behavior; you just get to be with the dog."

Her volunteer handlers make calls throughout northern Ocean and southern Monmouth counties but the requests often exceed the support that Caregiver Canines can provide, so individuals with a calm and compassionate dog are always encouraged to apply. Maley assesses each dog, and their handler, for the best match with a senior.

"I think the volunteers get just as much out of it as the dogs do," she added.

All across New Jersey, seniors enjoy regular therapeutic visits from dogs, and sometimes cats and bunnies, in their home or an adult facility for no charge or at a minimal cost.

At PAWS for People, volunteers are paired with specific sites that correspond to their personal interests.

"Our training process is more focused on the people," said Kate Rosenthal of PAWS for People about certifying caring owners and their well-trained pets. Her pet therapy teams are assigned to locations within the counties of Camden, Gloucester and Salem.

"It's a great way to volunteer and it's not a huge time commitment if you have an interest in this," she said. "If you have a fantastic dog, cat or bunny ... we would love to bring you in."

There are emotional, physical and mental benefits associated with this type of therapy for older adults. A blog on the Elder Care Alliance website notes how canine interactions can be beneficial to seniors by decreasing anxiety, improving motor skills, reducing loneliness, stimulating memory, and possibly lowering blood pressure readings and easing some physical pains.

"It's now an accepted form of alternative medicine," said June Golden, founder of The Bright & Beautiful Therapy Dogs in Morris Plains. She noted that when she founded the nonprofit in 1999, there was initial skepticism from hospital administrators until they saw how well-trained and credentialed the dogs were.

Golden has worked with more than 40,000 member volunteers nationwide — 10,000 of them in New Jersey. She personally certifies and interviews handlers, ensuring that their dog passes testing and is well-socialized with the right temperament.

Her mission is simple. "To take out loving dogs and share that love

they give us with people who are less fortunate," she said. "Dogs heighten awareness. I've experienced a lot of miracles doing this."

She recounts a visit to a group day center in which her border terrier was a beacon of communication for a non-vocal man. In a room full of seniors, one elderly gentleman approached her and unexpectedly took the leash from Golden. He then began verbally introducing her dog to each person in the room, explaining how the canine was native to his homeland.


Maley experienced the same situation when a customer requested a collie for her ailing husband who was nonverbal — that is, until the dog came to visit. The man's wife was so grateful to have her husband back for that brief period.

"Every time the dog came, he was a chatterbox. He told me his whole life story," said Maley about the memorable moment.

Many of the veteran handlers take pleasure in going on repeat visits, which can actually span several years.

"You become really good friends with the people you visit," Golden said. "You form a friendship and you look forward to going back and seeing them over and over again, and your dog becomes attached to them too."

For more information on these programs, or to inquire about volunteering, visit: <https://caregivervolunteers.org/get-help/caregiver-canines/>, www.pawsforpeople.org and <https://golden-dogs.org/>. While just three groups are highlighted here, an online web search yields other organizations throughout the state that provide pet therapy programs as part of their senior services. ❖

A close-up photograph of an elderly woman with short white hair and glasses, smiling warmly. A light-colored dog is leaning in and licking her cheek. The woman is wearing a patterned top and a gold necklace. The dog has a dark collar with a tag.

Barbara and Bitsy
get acquainted.

Photo courtesy of Caregiver Canines



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Photo courtesy of PAWS for People