

Is give nursing home patients responsibility and purpose in life

the old people, since that's what pet therapy is all about.

However, she says, it is a matter of priorities — whether to build housing for pets or use the money in other ways to help the elderly.

Sulik suggests using veterinary students from Texas A&M, who may be able to get class credit for their work, to help establish and maintain kennels in back of the home. McCulloch currently has graduate students working with him on the establishment of pet-people programs, and, he said, they might be able to help in this area.

Another alternative would be to have students bring pets to the various elderly homes for regular visits; or families of the residents could bring their own pets to the home, thus eliminating the liability problem, Sulik says.

All nursing home activity directors are open to the idea of having pets near the homes, because they say they are aware of the benefits.

However, they agree that a program for "visiting pets" should be established first before time and money are invested in permanent outdoor kennels.

Fe Moore, of Crestview Retirement Community, did a survey

of residents about their past experiences with pets, and their first reactions to the idea of having animals around the home. She said that 90 percent used to own pets, and about 50 percent were "unbelievably excited" about the idea of seeing them at Crestview.

"It (the survey) stirred up conversations and arguments between some residents that had never even talked to each other before," she said. "They spent hours arguing about who had the best pets, and just talking about the pleasant memories of their animals."

On the other hand, residents of Leisure Lodge have not been totally isolated from companion animals. Knowles said that a dog show at the home last year was successful not only at the time, but also for weeks later, as the elderly people continued to talk about the animals, and wonder out loud when they would be back.

An inspector for Leisure Lodge put a stop to the only permanent, "touchable" animal at the home, when he made a man remove his pet gerbil, she says.

The inspector cited sanitation as the main reason for not allowing the gerbil. Knowles says that other problems such as noise, bites and allergies would have to be worked out as well if other animals were permitted.

Dr. McCulloch said that although pets are not a panacea, he believes the positive effects of companion animals as an adjunct to other forms of therapy and activities far outweigh the possible problems.

He says the level of care provided at each home would play a part in determining the benefits or problems pets would cause. Homes where the elderly are entirely bedridden would obviously not be as good for animals as homes where only minimal care for the patients is necessary.

Also, provisions would have to be made about the kind and size of animals homes would be allowed to keep, McCulloch said. "Imagine a small-framed, crippled elderly woman wanting to bring a Great Dane to the nursing home!" he said.

A therapeutic possibility that would not involve such problems, activity director Knowles says, would be to place advertisements in the newspaper for some residents to walk or "babysit" dogs in the area for short periods of time. This would provide companionship, responsibility and exercise for the elderly, and would be a community service as well, she says.

"If pets could come to nursing homes it would help our business," Knolls says. "We could say 'Bring your mom here, and she can bring her dog, too.'"

Nursing home administrators, veterinarians and others who are interested, or have information, about pet therapy for the elderly may aid in Dr. Bill McCulloch's research by contacting him at 845-3517.



The simple stroking of companion animals has been proven physiologically beneficial for elderly people. Pets provide unconditional love and constant companionship for people who may have no other way of giving or receiving love from humans. Francis Pilger, 69, enjoys the time she is able to spend with her daughter's dog, Honey.

Photo by Brian Tate



a program that would allow elderly people, their pets, or even take the animals with them, where pets are currently not allowed.

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