Reaching Out to the Senior Community

Older and wiser, the retirement set can be great resource for shelters—and vice versa

BY DEBBIE SWANSON

James Jenkins, 91 years old, waits for his guests in his front yard, supporting himself with a cane. His two loyal dogs hover around, enjoying the day while keeping a watchful eye on their owner.

No longer able to drive, Jenkins relies on SHARE (Special Human-Animal Relationships), a Marin Humane Society program that assists homebound pet owners. Jenkins and other clients receive regular deliveries of donated dog and cat food, vet care assistance, basic pet medications—and a little friendly company. When the staff from Marin pull into the driveway, Jenkins lights up.

“The pets are part of their family—sometimes the only family they have nearby—and without this help, these owners may not be able to keep their pets,” says Carrie Harrington, communications manager for the Novato, Calif., shelter.

Keeping animals in their homes is what the SHARE program is all about. Needs vary with each situation, but eligible clients—typically seniors on a limited income, or HIV/AIDS patients living at home—receive deliveries of pet food, help with litter box cleaning or dog walking, or just routine well-being checks. Currently, the program assists approximately 250 area pet owners.

“The goal is to keep people and pets together,” Harrington says. “Some owners can take care of their pets, but are just physically unable to do certain things, like clean a litter box.” Others who are unable to drive to stores to get food and supplies depend on the deliveries to maintain their household.

SHARE began providing home visits to eligible homebound pet owners in 1987, in memory of Erica Ettinger. An animal lover concerned with the fate of homeless animals, by third grade Erica had already organized a fundraiser for Marin and visited a convalescent home with her own dog, Marcy. When a tragic bike accident took her life at age 8, the memorial funds that poured in in her name were used to continue her efforts and finance the SHARE program.

SHARE originally offered pet-assisted therapy to convalescent centers, but now provides a variety of services designed to keep animals and owners together. The program received national recognition in 1989, when it received a model program award from the Delta Society, a nonprofit that uses animal-assisted therapy to improve human health.

Considering a similar program at your shelter? “Don’t hesitate to reach out,” Harrington says. Other local groups and social service agencies—the Salvation Army, hospice
and elder visitation groups, Meals on Wheels—can become valuable partners. That kind of external assistance has been vital for Marin. “It would be nearly impossible to do it alone. Community support, as well as forming networks with other community-based organizations, has made this program possible.”

Harrington also credits the success of the program to Marin’s supporters. “Our holiday drive brings in a big portion of our donations of time and goods. Volunteer groups come in and put together gift bags for clients, and we have cookies and try to make it festive.”

Seniors and Animals: A Good Mix
With Americans living longer and healthier lives, senior citizens make up a larger portion of the population. Many have pets; many who don’t might benefit from their company. Several ’90s-era studies reported on the benefit pets bring to the elderly. A study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society reported that senior citizens who owned cats or dogs maintained a higher level of physical and social activity, experienced less depression, and were more tolerant of social isolation. Animals have also been credited with comforting those with Alzheimer’s and other memory-impairment disorders. These effects were noted in a 1999 study in the Journal of Psychological Nursing and Mental Health Services, which demonstrated that dogs could soothe patients who experienced increased anxiety toward the end of the day.

And while less-mobile older people may need assistance with caring for their animals, many active, healthy seniors may be an untapped resource of potential adopters, supporters, and volunteers for your organization. With more free time and more routine lifestyles, senior adults living on their own can often provide great foster or permanent homes for shelter pets. “Some of the best homes are with seniors because they often have the most time for socializing—which is frequently what the animal needs,” says Holly McArthur, director of marketing and development at Pet’s Lifeline Animal Shelter in Sonoma, Calif. “Animal companionship of all types is about good matches. Age, per se, is rarely a determining factor.”

McArthur has found that mature cats often make ideal companions for senior citizens—a bonus, since they’re often overlooked by younger families seeking more active felines. Pet’s Lifeline has reached out to seniors with mobile adoption events, seniors-for-senior animal programs, and reduced adoption fees. The shelter also welcomes seniors as foster parents, particularly for older animals and those with special needs. These potential owners go through the same screening and educational process anyone else would, McArthur says.

Some seniors may be excellent pet owners, but have limited transportation options—they may find it hard to get in to the shelter to check out available companions. Organizations can help by seeking ways to overcome those obstacles. Encourage staff and volunteers to regularly identify animals who seem more suited to a senior owner, and organize ways to bring those animals to the attention of potential owners—for example, by planning a senior spotlight day, running a mobile adoption event at a nearby retirement community, highlighting senior pets on your website, or making prearranged home visits.

Visits from pets bring happiness to residents of assisted living centers, and the animals seem to enjoy them, too. Socialized pets who are prepared for such duties are typically delighted by the extra attention and caresses.
reaching senior citizens

Staff involved in the SHARE program at Marin often bring pets to meet potential owners. “Some clients want another cat or dog, but can’t get in to the shelter. If staff see a dog or cat with the right temperament, they’ll arrange to bring them to visit the homebound potential owner,” says Harrington.

Share an Animal Bond
Bringing joy to others is a driving motivation for many of those who participate in senior outreach programs. When Eileen Weinberg adopted a docile dachshund mix, Phoebe, from Save a Sato—an organization that helps place Puerto Rican street dogs in homes—she wanted to give the pup a happier life. And she also wanted a pet who would help to spread some happiness to others.

“The elder community is a community that’s lost … they really need the visitation,” says Weinberg.

At first, though, Weinberg wasn’t sure the shy dog would be a success as a visitor.

“Two trainers told me it wouldn’t happen—she was too skittish …” said Weinberg. But she didn’t give up on her new friend. “I brought her to a behaviorist, and after seven months of training, brought Phoebe to PetPals.”

Phoebe passed the required screening, and soon she and her adopted mom began visiting residents of a Boston-area nursing home through the PetPals program, run by FriendshipWorks. The group collaborates with the Animal Rescue League of Boston to organize volunteer visits at nursing homes.

Phoebe seems to be a natural at charming the residents. “One person doesn’t really like to pet Phoebe, so she sits at my feet and lets that person look. For others, she’ll jump right up on their bed. She’s very intuitive about who likes what, and behaves accordingly,” says Weinberg. “The residents love her—she’s like a rock star walking through the halls.”

Many assisted living facilities don’t allow residents to keep pets, but will be more than happy to entertain well-behaved four-legged visitors from time to time. Animals are a natural morale booster, and can bring a burst of wagging (or sometimes purring) joy to senior centers, and a special pleasure to those residents who may miss their own pets. Animal visitors can serve as icebreakers, and often draw out the residents who keep to their rooms, and inspire the quieter residents to start conversing about their own past beloved pets.

Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, Mass., has been bringing animals and seniors together for several years. “It began when one employee brought her two dogs to visit an assisted living center. It went so well that soon another employee joined in, and it grew to include volunteers from the community,” says executive director Randi Cohen. “Now we have a full-time volunteer who organizes our program.”

Typical visits involve an animal-owner pair and one resident of an assisted living center, or one or two animal-owner pairs making the rounds at a group gathering in a facility’s social hall.

Picking and Choosing
While shelter behaviorists and volunteers may be perfect matches for running senior outreach programs, shelter pets are often another story.

Cohen and other experts say that bringing shelter pets as visitors to nursing homes can be risky. It’s difficult to be sure about an animal’s true personality based on a limited stay in a shelter, and there may be some safety and liability issues for those animals whose personalities, likes, and dislikes aren’t known quantities. Instead, at Northeast, pets owned by staff members or community volunteers make the visits, serving as representatives of the shelter.

Animals who’ve been adopted from the shelter and been in their homes for a while can make ideal participants. That mellow basset hound mix who went home with the cheerful 20-something with the great smile? That highly social, affectionate cat who could never get enough of meeting new people? They may be perfect candidates; a shelter’s adopters and active supporters may serve as a great recruiting pool for organizations looking to start a senior visiting program.

Cohen can’t say enough about the rewards. “Shelters are all about finding homes for animals, but it’s also about the
reaching senior citizens

A Bird with Purpose
Most people have heard about dogs visiting nursing homes, but they’re not the only creatures capable of spreading the love.

Indy, a dusky conure, was picked up by the Animal Rescue League of Boston when he was found on the streets talking to passersby.

When no owner surfaced, Debbie Vogel, the League’s volunteer manager, adopted the bird. Since he loves to talk, Vogel thought he would be a great addition to the PetPals program, and Indy soon signed on for visitations.

“Indy frequently visits an adult day health program. He loves to watch the men playing dominoes, and asks them, “What are you doing?”’ says Ellen Kirchheimer, program director. “They’ll stop what they’re doing, and answer him. His family may be tired of answering him all the time, but the seniors he visits are ready to answer Indy’s question!”

In addition to chatting, Indy amuses his audience by barking, imitating phones, alarms, and microwaves, reports Vogel. He also enjoys being handled. His trimmed wings keep his flying to a minimum, a safety precaution designed to prevent a repeat of his earlier wandering ways.

Indy has developed a following of fans, and has even flapped his way into the hearts of many devout dog lovers. He’ll even treat listeners to an occasional “Let’s go, Red Sox!”
reaching senior citizens

Meeting people is good for the puppies, too, who gain exposure to a variety of people and situations, an important step in their early socialization.

When bringing visitors in, be sure to have staff on hand to assist with the animals. Inquire ahead of time if the visitors have any special circumstances or any preferences—meeting cats versus dogs, for example—and have an empty office or conference room ready in case a visitor needs a break from the animals.

As the country grows grayer, it’s smart for any animal welfare organization to figure out how to reach out to elders, both those who need company and assistance, and those who are eager to spend their golden years helping others. Outreach and visitation programs, promotion of adoptable animals to senior communities—all of these provide great opportunities for companionship, goodwill, and community involvement, and may help you find more homes for the many cats and dogs who deserve their own happy retirement.

Many dogs like nothing better than a ride in the car, but most cats loathe such a trip. But Krowka, visiting with residents at the Cambridge Homes in Cambridge, Mass., seems to have completely forgotten how she got there.

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Back and Forth

Animals can go visit seniors, but seniors can come visit them in the shelter, too. Northeast Animal Shelter occasionally invites nursing home residents to stop by and meet some of the shelter animals. For this type of visit, carefully selected shelter pets are brought out to interact with the guests.

“Puppies seem to work best,” says Cohen. “We’ve had groups of Alzheimer’s patients come visit, and they just love the puppies. These are people that might not smile all day otherwise.”

Resources

For helpful guidelines on nursing home visit:
- avma.org/issues/policy/animal_assisted_guidelines.asp.
- The Delta Society (deltasociety.org)

needed. Then follow up with the newcomers to answer any questions and get their impressions.

“I’ve read a lot of the studies,” says Kirchheimer, “but witnessing a pet visitation in a nursing home brings the studies to life. These people perk up and come alive when an animal visits. It’s just amazing to witness.”

LAURA EVONNE STEINMAN

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