

# Letters

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## **Responsive Chord on Pets and Therapy**

I just received my January-March 1983 issue of the *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*. Thank you for the wonderful editorial! What you are saying is so true! For the last 3 years or so I have worked in a nursing home as an "Animal Facilitated Therapist." I started there on a volunteer basis, bringing my own animals into visit. The home decided to purchase animals of its own. None of the staff was knowledgeable concerning animals or their care. Also, most felt that their job was with the residents, and not the animals. Little did they realize how much the residents suffered when the animals suffered. Consequently, the guinea pigs had maggots in their cage, the rabbits either starved or froze to death, birds passed away etc., etc. Once the home had animals of its own, I no longer made visits with mine. At that time we did not have a local humane society. I contacted the state society as well as a nearby society concerning the condition of the animals. They did nothing.

After the demise of so many animals, the nursing home hired me to care for them and to set up a "therapy" program. Once I started working at the nursing home, I was appalled by the lack of concern toward the animals that was shown by the staff. The prevailing attitude was that they were disposable — not living, feeling beings. Most of the residents, though, were very concerned about the animals, but were afraid to voice it. One resident confided her anxiety to me by stating that if she were to voice her concern for the animals, she might become labeled as a complainer. And complainers' call lights were answered last.

I am not a scientific person, but I do know that animals help people. With the help of the animals, I "reached" many residents that did not respond otherwise. Very simply, friendship and trust arose from our mutual interest and concern for the animals. And what really surprised

me is that this improved climate has continued over the months, even though I no longer work there. From what the residents tell me, the care of the animals, however, is still questionable. But we now have a humane society, and they are supposed to be keeping an eye on the welfare of the animals.

I don't know what the answer is. I could see how much happiness and joy the animals brought to the residents — but at what price to the animals? I have gone back to school to obtain a degree in "Animal Facilitated Therapy." This summer I would like to start an outreach program on my farm, working with my own animals. Then, I would at least know that the animals are receiving good care and are not being abused. Residents of such places as nursing homes suffer enough without having to shoulder the added burden of worrying about the care (or lack of it) of the animals that visit or live with them.

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