

CREATURE COMFORTS

Animal companions provide life-giving therapy

BY KAREN SINGER

Doris Wujcik's eyes widened and a broad smile spread across her face as she welcomes her favorite Tuesday visitor.

"Do you want to give me a kiss?" Wujcik asks Eddie, a grey-and-white-striped cat she sees once a week for half an hour at the Jerome Home in New Britain, the independent and assisted-living facility where she lives. Eddie usually complies but on this day he's distracted by a photographer's equipment.

Eddie's owner, Terri Jennings, cradled the cat for reassurance as Wujcik, a bespectacled lady with white hair seated next to her, gently stroked the fur ball.


"I love cats," the elderly woman says. "They know when you're upset and they can tell when you like them."

A few minutes later, Wujcik leans over and gets her kiss, as Eddie emits a low purr.

Eddie and another cat owned by Jennings are the only feline members of the Wags & Tails program at Jerome Home, where a half-dozen dogs also interact with residents, and occasionally a pot-bellied pig and a llama stop by for a group visit.

Man's best friend is by far the most popular creature for this kind of work, according to the Delta Society, a national organization that tests animals for volunteer duty in settings such as hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities, and provides liability insurance for animals and handlers registered in its Pet Partners program.

Ninety-five percent of Pet Partners are dogs, says Delta spokesperson Bill Kueser. The other top three therapy animals are cats, rabbits and miniature horses. Llamas, alpacas, donkeys, mules and domestic birds are among the rest.



Doris Wujcik visits with feline friend Eddie each week. 'Tuesdays are important,' she says. 'I wait for him.'

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo



Debbie McConnell and Joya (pictured), the mustang she adopted, spread cheer at area nursing homes.

As of this September there were 406 Delta-registered animals in Connecticut. Only ten were not dogs, and they included a cat, cockatoo, llama and several horses.

“Some of the best therapy pets are from shelters,” says Sally Sizer, a Connecticut evaluator for the Delta Society. “What really matters is their temperament.”

Animals are assessed by different criteria, depending on the species, and testing often includes dropping objects behind an animal to observe its reaction and having several people hug or brush it at the same time.

Delta-registered felines need to wear a harness attached to a leash, and enjoy sitting quietly on a towel covering a stranger’s lap.

“You can’t obedience-train cats but you can expect them to like people,” Sizer says. “Over the years, I’ve worked with cats that have worked with autistic children and older people with cataracts. Cats give them a really nice tactile experience, especially long-haired cats.”

Therapy llamas need to be trained to climb stairs, but apparently do not need potty training.

“They do not go to the bathroom in a health-care facility,” Sizer explains.

Birds must sit on their handler’s shoulder or hand and take a treat without injuring the feeder.

Because rabbits can “fall down dead” from fear while being tested, Betsy Quitko, another Delta evaluator, always has “a long consultation” with owners beforehand to discuss the risks.

Some species are off-limits.

“Delta does not certify reptiles or ferrets, lions and tigers and coyotes,” says Sizer, who has tested animals belonging to retirees as well with teenagers seeking to meet school community-service requirements and even “kids as young as ten if they can prove to me they can control the animal.”

Both Sizer and Quitko say the desire to “give back to the community” is a common theme among owners seeking to register pets as animal-assisted therapy animals.

That’s certainly true for Jennings, a veteran animal rescuer who initially wanted a therapy dog. When medical problems intervened, she Delta-registered an 18-pound rescued cat named Dog, and started volunteering at Jerome Home. She is assigned to just three or four residents at a time, often for months, for one-on-one visits with Dog or Eddie, who she found in a ditch when he was around three weeks old.

“The first thing is they’re all gaga over the critters, which is good for conversation and something pleasant to talk about,” Jennings says. “That can segue into conversations about family, life and death. People who don’t remember what they had for breakfast can remember the 12 cats they had when they were seven, and they tend to remember my cat’s name more than mine.

“Some people get better and move on,” she says. “Some people pass.”

George Moore, who visits several Trumbull nursing homes with his Moluccan cockatoo, Sammy, is motivated by a desire “to bring a little joy” to the residents. A “stay-at-home dad,” Moore



Eleven-year-old Lauren visits with Kate Nicoll (left) and her guinea pig Zoe.

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCato

has several other parrots but only Sammy seemed suited for the job.

“She’s the type of cockatoo they call a love sponge,” he says. “She is like a bottomless pit when it comes to wanting affection.”

After training Sammy to wear a harness and passing the Delta evaluation with flying colors, Moore and the cockatoo began their volunteering in 2006.

“At first, people don’t believe it’s a real bird,” Moore says. “Then, depending on the patient’s response, I’ll kneel down and let them pet Sammy. One woman, who’s 103, waits in the lobby every day, and asks, ‘Is the bird coming today?’”

Moore believes Sammy enjoys the attention. “And I get satisfaction that I know I’m bringing something to brighten up somebody’s day that really no one in Connecticut can do except for me.”

Delta registered animals need to be re-evaluated every two years. As of September, Sammy was the only bird on its Connecticut roster.



Jim Griffin and Yankee, an American paint horse he rescued, also are spreading cheerfulness, along with Debbie McConnell and Joya, a mustang she adopted from the federal Bureau of Land Management’s wild horse and burro program. The horses were Delta-tested and registered together in 2005.

Since then they have been visiting area nursing homes and Riverview Hospital for

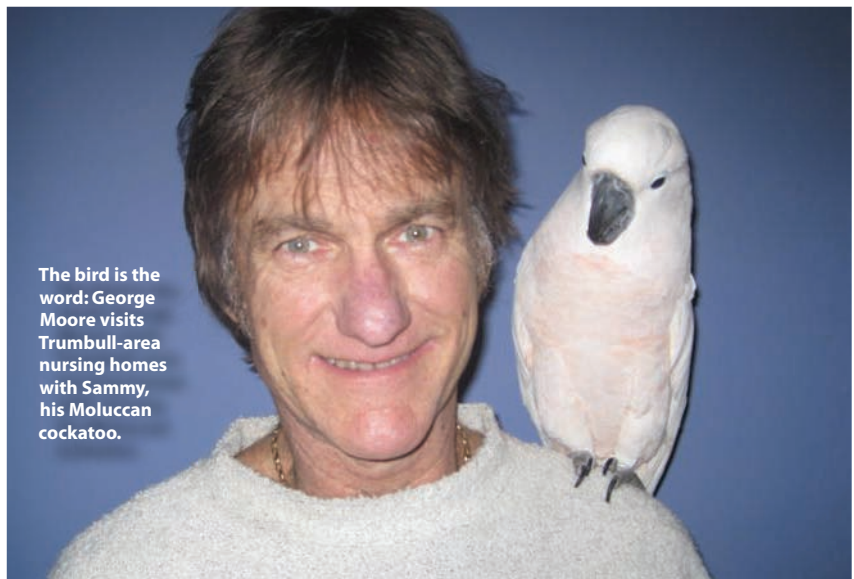
Children and Youth Services, a psychiatric hospital in Middletown run by the state. Outside each location, they allow people to pet and groom, but not ride, the horse. Griffin and Yankee also perform old West-type tricks for their audiences.

“I pretend I’m a horse thief, and he’ll try and knock me over,” says Griffin, a AAA dispatcher from Branford who also pens Western novels. “Or I’ll pretend I’ve been shot, and he’ll roll me over with his nose until I get up.

“I don’t know who gets more out of it, the patients or us,” Griffin adds. “It’s just such a wonderful feeling to see smiles on people’s faces.”

McConnell, who trained Joya by gaining the animal’s trust, realized her mustang had “this special way with people” a few years ago at a fundraiser for a therapy school in New Hampshire. “A very debilitated woman in a wheelchair kept looking at Joya, and she walked over and put her head in the woman’s lap,” McConnell recalled. “The woman’s fingers were all gnarled up but when she reached out to pet Joya, her fingers seemed to relax.

“I honestly think that Joya feels as if she’s doing something by making someone feel good. You can just see it in her face, a calmness and a peacefulness.”



The bird is the word: George Moore visits Trumbull-area nursing homes with Sammy, his Moluccan cockatoo.

Griffin had a similar experience, when a nursing home resident began stroking and talking to Yankee. Seeing tears streaming down her aide's face, he found out the woman hadn't spoken in months.

"People write about the benefits and the anecdotal stories, but there's very little research to show that animal-assisted therapy actually works," says Donna Latella, an associate professor of occupational therapy at Quinnipiac University and a therapeutic riding instructor at High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Center in Old Lyme. She does therapy work with a dog and several horses, including a 36-inch miniature horse she brings to Orchard House, an adult day care center in Branford. "You see that it works when you see somebody smile and see improvements."

According to Alice Lee, activities director at Peregrine's Landing in Clinton, a residence for Alzheimer's patients where Yankee and Joya, the horses, sometimes visit: "Pet therapy calms the residents and makes them feel warmer, softer and more secure." Therapy dogs and rescued chinchillas, guinea pigs and rabbits from the Children's Farm at the Waterford Country School also visit the facility,

which has three resident cats and a coop full of chickens.

Kate Nicoll knows firsthand about the close connection between humans and other animals. A few years ago, while recovering from partial paralysis caused a spinal cord virus and observing how attentive her Husky dog was to her nerve pain, the social worker took an online course about animal assisted therapy. She subsequently founded Soul Friends Inc., a non-profit organization in Wallingford providing clinical and educational programs for children to promote "the healing benefits of the human-animal bond." Animals in the programs include dogs, horses, rabbits and guinea pigs.

"We've done some research, presented at an international conference about interactions with therapy dogs to increase eye contact with people and to increase body awareness," Nicoll says. Other studies are examining how children with trauma and loss and anger issues can improve their outlook and peer connections by working with therapy animals.

Nicoll also is author of Soul Friends: Finding Healing with Animals and A

Therapy Dog at Work and Play: Teaching Children About Body Clues.

"Who would think a guinea pig can help people relax and slow down?" says Nicoll, who wrote a curriculum including guinea pigs for children struggling with trauma and loss. "They eat fast, think fast and go to the bathroom fast.

"One of the most powerful experiences I ever had was with a guinea pig."

It occurred during a therapy session where Nicoll compared the creature's "anxious" instincts to "what can happen when we get into scary situations and our bodies can take over," and a child blurted out, "So you mean when my dad hit my mom I got scared and peed in my pants? Wow, I feel so much better now."


Relaxed guinea pigs also are helpful.

"When they're comfortable, they grind their teeth, which sounds like purring, and they kind of sit there and let you pet them," Nicoll says. "It's amazing how teenage boys will wait for the guinea pig to get the carrot. They learn patience, respect for personal space and boundaries,

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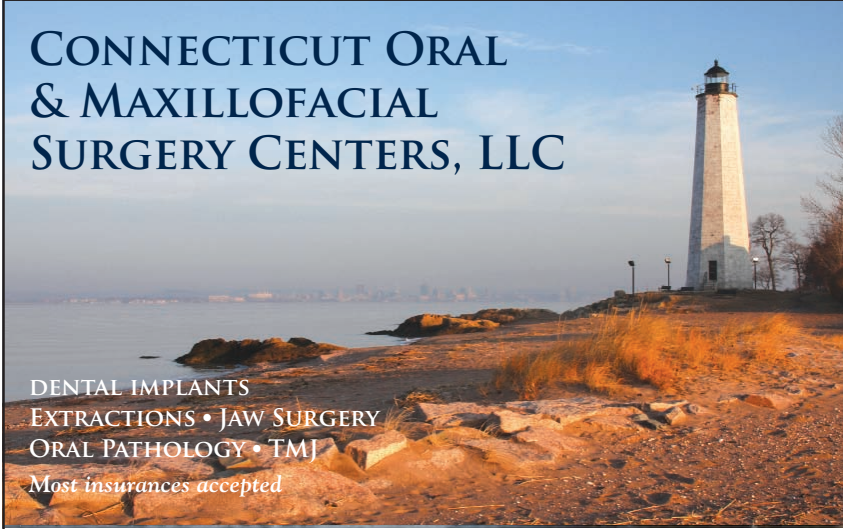
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THERAPY ANIMALS

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and we help them to apply it to their interactions with people."

In 2007, Cynthia Conrad did research on the effects of animal-assisted therapy in around 230 Connecticut long-term care centers. At that time dogs were most common visitors, along with a few cats, guinea pigs and other animals including a llama. Conrad, who now heads the Department of Public Management at the University of New Haven, wondered whether the human (owner) contact or animal contact was most beneficial to residents.

"It seemed to be the animal," she says. "A lot of people had dogs and cats when they were younger, and it was nice to have that connection again."

Conrad describes the visits as "remarkably effective in a lot of ways, in relaxing patients, giving them something positive and kind of bringing them out of their shell."

Conrad, who would like to repeat the study, believes many long-term care facilities need a radical makeover.

"I really hope all of us in our 50s and 60s are not looking at a bleak future, where they put us in nursing homes like kennels and say, 'Die faster,'" she says.

Conrad advocates the Eden Alternative, a form of long-term care with "lots of animals and plants to make the facility full of life.

"It incorporates the whole idea that if you're in an environment surrounded by living creatures, you're going to be happier," she explains.

In the hallways at Jerome Home, Jennings often is stopped by residents "begging me for a visit" with the cat in her stroller.

Rita Nadeau-Breive, Jerome's director of therapeutic recreation and volunteer services, says there is a waiting list to see the cats and she and Jennings are developing a program to encourage more cat owners to participate in the Wags & Tails program.

For Doris Wujcik, who owned cats and dogs before moving to Jerome Home, the chance to cuddle with Eddie clearly is a highlight of her week.

"Tuesdays are important," she says. "I wait for him."