

Therapy Dogs

Man's best friend gives a helping paw

By Ginny Frizzi, Creators.com

Therapy dogs have enjoyed a higher profile in recent years, but they are not a new concept. In fact, according to Mary Burch, the director of the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen program and an animal behaviorist, animals were used in therapy with people with disabilities as early as the ninth century in Belgium.

Therapy Dogs International, the oldest and largest therapy group in the United States, was founded in 1976. Since then, tens of thousands of dogs and their owners have been trained and volunteered in therapy settings.

"Therapy dogs are healthy dogs who are free from illnesses and parasites, although in some cases, they may have a physical disability," Burch says. "Behaviorally, therapy dogs are under good control, and they are predictable and stable. At a minimum, all therapy dogs should be able to pass the Canine Good Citizen test, which is a basic test of good manners."

Therapy dog groups have their own tests that go beyond the skills on the CGC program's test. "Items related specifically to therapy settings are added to a therapy dog assessment," Burch says. For example, a dog needs to follow the command "leave it" when it walks by food or pills on the floor. "In settings with young children, the dog might be tested to see that it responds acceptably if an excited person rushes up and makes loud noises. In nursing home settings in which the dog will visit a group of senior citizens, the dog is taught to 'go say hello.'"

Therapy dogs serve a variety of people and purposes. Last year, Family Hospice & Palliative Care added Ivan, a 2-year-old golden retriever, to its staff as a full-time therapy dog. Ivan, who works at Family Hospice's 12-bed Center for Compassionate Care, was trained by New Hope Assistance Dogs.

Rafael Sciuolo, president and CEO of Family Hospice, was responsible for adding Ivan to the staff. "I thought it was a piece that was missing, and a colleague told me about New Hope Assistance Dogs. I looked into it and thought Ivan would be a perfect fit," he says. "He helps complete our mission of providing compassionate care (and) contributes compassionate care for the patients, comforts vulnerable family members and is a valuable team member to the rest of the staff, which has embraced him."

Ivan, who makes daily rounds with the center's doctor, lives with and goes to work with Sciuolo. "He is like any other employee who has to go to work. In the morning, I say, 'Ivan, time to go to work now,' and he gets all excited," he says.

Ivan's fellow employees walk and help to care for him at work, but like them, he goes home each evening. "As with any other staffer, work for him is stressful, and Ivan needs his space," Sciuolo says. Ivan provides a calming effect, brings peace and joy to patients, combats loneliness, and often brings back pleasant memories, according to Sciuolo.

But people don't need to be ill to receive benefits from therapy dogs. Brandy and Val, two rescue dogs owned by Ilene Fine, are therapy dogs who work with autistic children in a reading program.

Fine, a longtime volunteer with children, became interested when she heard about a pet therapy program. "My interest was sparked because it involved kids. I didn't know whether Brandy and Val would be good therapy dogs, but both passed the test," she says.

According to Fine, there are many organizations across the country, such as the Delta Society, that train and certify dogs for programs. Many hospitals, health centers, libraries and even jails also are adding pet therapy dogs to their schedules. She suggests that those interested call around locally to find training programs, do an Internet search for pet therapy training showcases, or check out <http://www.charityguide.org/volunteer/fewhours/pet-therapy.htm>.

"Most programs require about 20 hours of training with a certification test at the end. From there, the program helps a team choose a program appropriate to them," Fine says.

The three participate in the Paws to Read program, in which children are encouraged to read and talk to Brandy and Val.

"The kids read out loud and have no fear that adults will interrupt or correct them. I only get involved if they ask a question," Fine says. "We have seen progress. Introverted children become less inhibited around them." Brandy and Val help the autistic children develop socialization and bonding skills. Other activities concentrate on improving motor skills and co-ordination.

"They will learn how to use a brush by brushing one of the dogs or feed them with a fork to learn how to use a utensil," says Fine, who notes that her dogs have a secondary leash, which enables the children to walk them in the hallways of the library. She and the dogs also conduct dog safety awareness sessions in schools and participate in Animal Rescue Week.

Fine writes a blog, at <http://www.BrandyAndVal.com/blog/feed>, and is the author of the book "Brandy and Val's Special Story," the tale of how the dogs were rescued, with all sales proceeds going to charity.



Ivan is a therapy dog for people with serious illnesses. His owner says he's excited to go to work every day.