

CAREGIVER

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PET PEACE OF Mind

By Ginny Frizzi

Patients entering hospice care and their families have many things to worry about. Fortunately, for Family Hospice and Palliative Care patients, caring for their pets is not one of them.

Family Hospice, located in Mt. Lebanon, has a Pet Peace of Mind program that provides care for the pets of hospice patients. Volunteers provide services including walking, feeding and taking pets to veterinary appointments.

The idea for the program, which began in July, 2011, came from a Family Hospice nurse.

"She heard about a pet care program and it sounded like a great idea, so we looked into it," according to volunteer programs coordinator Nick Petri.

Funded by a \$5,000 grant, the Pet Peace of Mind program provides hospice patients with something important — piece of mind when it comes to their pets.

"This is one less thing for them to worry about. The patients know that their pets are being cared for, which eliminates a big concern," said Petri.

He gave the example of one woman with

a pulmonary condition who lacked the ability to care for her pet. Family Hospice and Palliative Care volunteers not only came to her home walk the woman's pet, but enjoyed visiting with her as well.

Twenty-one volunteers have been trained for the Pet Peace of Mind program. Their training includes a session with an animal expert who teaches them how to approach a dog for the first time and tips on getting along with pets.

"Volunteers are encouraged to keep the pet connected to the owner," said Petri.

Pets can also visit owners in the Family Hospices in-patient unit.

"It helps keep the connection between the patients and their pets, which is one of the objectives of our program," said Petri.

"It eliminates a worry and helps keep the patient from becoming withdrawn or depressed."

Program volunteer Nels Unrath, an Upper St. Clair resident got involved in the Pet Peace of Mind when he saw an ad in the newspaper looking for volunteers. He also had a more personal reason.

"Family Hospice and Palliative Care



Volunteer Nels Unrath walks Meggie, a border Collie-Springer Spaniel mix, as part of a program through Family Hospice in Mt. Lebanon.

took such good care of my wife's sister that it was a good way to show our gratitude for what they had done for her," he said.

Unrath, who also volunteers at Animal Friends, started in August with Family Hospice. He walks Meggie, a 13-year-old border collie-Springer Spaniel mix owned by Mary Jane Hoff and her husband Elmer, a patient of Family Hospice.

"It's a routine to come and walk the dog, then talk a bit with Mary Jane," he said.

Mary Jane Hoff, a resident of the western suburbs, thinks highly of the Pet Peace of Mind program.

"It's a great program. It benefits my husband and me and Meggie," she said.

Hoff said that Meggie waits at the door for Unrath to come for their walk.

"The volunteers are wonderful enthusiasts and give of their time. We are very fortunate that they come," said Hoff.

Family Hospice hopes to expand the Pet Peace of Mind program to the City of Pittsburgh, its eastern office territory in Forest Hills, and its northern location in Hermitage.

For information about the program or to volunteer, call 412-572-8806. ■