

Program helps terminally ill patients care for pets

Hospice organization's volunteer initiative believed to be first of its kind in state

BY RICK WILLS
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Almost no one knows or understands Leethia Haddad better than Niles and Alexander.

"They even come up to me in bed — they just know I'm not feeling well," Haddad, 69, of Pennsbury Village said of her two Siamese cats. "I do not know what I would do if I could not take care of my two cats."

Haddad knows that the emotional bond between pets and their owners can be impenetrable. So she was among the first to volunteer for Pet Peace of Mind — a program run by a Mt. Lebanon hospice in which volunteers care for the pets of terminally ill patients.

"This program just touched my heart. It is a comfort for people to know that they are being taken care of," Haddad said.

Family Hospice and Palliative Care, the largest of Western Pennsylvania's approximately 30 hospice organizations, started the program this month for its program's funder.

The welfare of a household pet might seem secondary in the face of imminent death, but experts on end-of-life matters say pets are as important to some people as are friends and family members — maybe even more so.

"There are patients who say that they cannot die until their pets have a new home," said Dianne McGill, executive director of the Portland, Ore.-based Banfield Charitable Trust, a charity funded by Banfield Pet Hospital, a privately owned com-



PHILIP G. PAVELY | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Leethia Haddad and Ivan volunteer their time with the Pet Peace of Mind program.

pany that operates about 700 veterinary clinics and PetSmart stores. The trust gave a grant to Family Hospice for the program.

Pet owners often fear that, after they die, their animals will be taken to shelters.

"That's a very real concern, and a real possibility, for the pets of many hospice patients," McGill said.

Family Hospice has trained 21 volunteers in the past month and has had inquiries about the same number of potential volunteers, a response that exceeds expectations, said Nick Petti, who coordinates Family Hospice's volunteer programs.

"It is a phenomenal response. This is a whole new group of volunteers for us. This program

opens up volunteering for people who love animals. Many people really bond with their pets. Pets will stay by their side. They are nonjudgmental," Petti said.

Banfield Charitable Trust said it believes the pet program run by the Family Hospice is the first of its kind in Pennsylvania. Animal Friends, an Ohio Township animal shelter, takes in pets of women in domestic abuse situations and multiple sclerosis patients who refuse hospitalization, said Jolene Miklas, spokeswoman.

"When an individual is in crisis, they need their pet. Or they need to know their pet is cared for. We are committed to providing that," Miklas said.

Visits from pets have been a

popular feature for years at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

"Animals can play a big role in breaking the isolation of patients, especially children," said Dr. Susan Hunt, a specialist in Hospice and Palliative Medicine at UPMC who five years ago started similar programs at UPMC Presbyterian and UPMC Montefiore.

"We have patients who do not get many visitors and who are often in the hospital for a long time. A visit from a dog could really be the highlight of their day," Hunt said.

Those interested in volunteering for Family Hospice may call 412-572-8806, or visit www.familyhospice.com and click on "Become a Volunteer."