

CORPORATE WHIRL

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Dog days rule at Family Hospice and Palliative Care.

BY KATIE MAVRICH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN WYLIE RUFFING

The newest member of the staff at Family Hospice and Palliative Care's Center for Compassionate Care in the South Hills greets me warmly — he sniffs my pants, likely picking up the scent of my dog, and as I lean over to pet him, he rolls over so that I can rub his belly. Ivan, a two-and-a-half-year-old golden retriever, is a full-time therapy dog.

"My goal here is to create an experience of comfort for patients and families as possible. He'll definitely add to that," says Family Hospice President and CEO Rafael Sciuлло.

Ivan was trained at New Hope Assistance Dogs in Warren, Pa., as an assistance dog with a background as a companion for the disabled. To complete his training, "He needed to be around a lot of different people," including patients in nursing homes, patients in wheelchairs, children. "[In order] that he became adaptable and flexible, he was in a number of foster homes. He also has a whole list of commands that he follows," Sciuлло says.

Rafael Sciuлло and Ivan photographed at Family Hospice and Palliative Care's Center for Compassionate Care.

Pets of patients are allowed to visit at Family Hospice, but they are not allowed to live there. To differentiate between Ivan and visiting pets, Ivan wears a name tag with his picture on it, just like the rest of the staff.

Not only does Ivan bring a sense of calm and peace to the patients at Family Hospice, he provides comfort to families and friends of patients. Sciuлло recounts a patient with end-stage dementia whose friends and family were saddened by the severe progression of her illness. "The nurse brought Ivan into the room, and he went to each one of the family members and then to the patient and put his paw next to her on the bed. The family described a real sense of calm that came about in the atmosphere in the room," he says.

When a patient comes to Family Hospice, the team develops a care plan, which often involves Ivan. "There are those people who have some type of discomfort and don't respond well to medication or an IV. But the unconditional love of a pet, they respond to very well," Sciuлло says.

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Ivan's daily schedule includes two walks and a break from work. He has his own bed and space in the inpatient unit of the Center, and goes home with Sciuлло on the weekends. Sciuлло is very dedicated to making sure that Ivan's needs are met and that he stays healthy. To avoid the temptation for patients to share their meals with Ivan, each patient has a bag of dog treats. Despite his flattering photos, Sciuлло says that a recent trip to the vet revealed he is 10 pounds overweight. "We are watching his weight now," Sciuлло says. "We obviously want him to be with us and be functional for a long time."

Family Hospice does employ other therapy dogs, but they work on an hourly basis. Ivan is the first full-time, five-day-a-week therapy dog. And it looks like he'll be the only one for a while. "We just want to pay as much attention to his needs as possible." ©

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