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Saturday, June 11, 2005



Local News

Therapy dogs provide special comfort to clients of hospice



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By Kate Andrews The Record Herald

CHAMBERSBURG - Emma is a very good therapist.



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Her gentle brown eyes immediately put her clients at ease.

She's a wonderful listener - never judging and never interrupting.

When she walks into a room, problems just seem to disappear.

But it's her happily wagging tail that really sets her apart.

Emma is a therapy dog with Kindly Canines, a volunteer organization in Chambersburg.

She and a few fellow dogs are part of a new pet therapy program launched by Hospice of the Good Shepherd.

"We wanted to be able to offer clients additional services, and we are familiar with pet therapy and the benefits of it," said Melanie Furlong, director of community relations for the hospice.

The hospice, a program of Lutheran Home Care Services of

Chambersburg, serves 80 to 90 clients in Adams, Franklin and Fulton counties.

The agency provides physical, emotional and spiritual support to terminally ill patients and their families. Pet therapy is offered free to all hospice patients.

Pet therapy benefits

The benefits of pet therapy are immediately obvious, Furlong says.

"It almost seems to take pain away," she said. "It takes their mind off of it."

Noncommunicative patients will come out of their silent shells.

"When they see the animals, they get smiles on their faces and brighten up. I don't know what the animals do, but they do something," said Janet Dell, hospice director.

A therapy dog once stepped on the legs of a man who had severe pain throughout his body, according to Furlong. But the man didn't mind.

"For these 20 minutes, I have no pain," he said.

Another woman, who suffers from anxiety and dementia, believes that she is riding a train. She can't close her eyes for fear of missing her stop.

With Emma cuddling up to her and Emma's handler, Pat Worthington, promising to watch for her stop, the woman will finally close her eyes.

"It's amazing how these animals (respond). It's like they sense what they are doing. They're very gentle and very loving, and it's like they can tell what's going on," Furlong said.

Dale Shoop, 80, of Fayetteville gets visits from one of the pet therapy dogs.

"She takes my mind off of myself and makes me think of how people are trying to help (by way of this program)," he said.

The program



The pet therapy program is completely run by volunteers.

Hospice patients can set up pet therapy through their hospice liaisons. They are then matched up with the right dog and a schedule is set up.

Hospice patients can have a visit once a week or "however often they want," Furlong said.

All pet therapy dogs come from Kindly Canines, which was founded by Marti Heater of Chambersburg two years ago.

"We work with her because of her expertise. We wouldn't want to try to start something on our own out of the blue. Not just any old dog can do this," Furlong said.

Heater trains and certifies the therapy dogs and works with handlers.

The volunteer handlers also go through hospice volunteer training, which teaches them about death, dying and handling the emotions of working with hospice patients.

Anyone interested in training to be a hospice volunteer can call Furlong at 800-840-9081.

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