

Vet students care, comfort families with dying pets

By Caroline Welch
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Cate Carson was 12 years old when her cat Bucko died of a tumor in his jaw.

"He got really thin and lost a lot of energy," said Carson, a freshman sociology major. "We didn't really know what was going on."

Carson's family took Bucko to the vet and found that even though surgery could be done, it may not have saved Bucko. The family had to put the cat down.

Situations like this are why in February 2004, CSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital and the Argus Institute created a pet hospice program, the first of its kind in the country.

The program is similar to a human hospice program and is designed to help families with the end of their pet's life, said Debra Stirling, a junior veterinary student and co-team manager of the program.

According to Gail Bishop, co-faculty adviser for the program, the ultimate goal of the program is "to help families take care of their terminally-ill pets and let the pet die peacefully at home."

The program is run entirely by student volunteers who travel within a 30-mile radius to care for families and their dying pets, Stirling said.

"We help families understand what is going on," Stirling said. "We educate them on what their animal is going through and let them know that it is OK to grieve."

The volunteers also care for the pet itself. They assess pain, comfort levels and give medications to the pets, Stirling said.

"It is rewarding and sad, but we get the chance to help pets and owners through a hard and difficult situation," Stirling said. "We are helping animals feel better and helping families cope."

Gail Bishop, communication outreach and clinical coordinator for the Argus Institute, said the program is directly in line with the goals and mission of the Argus Institute, which is to "prepare veterinary teams to successfully meet the emotional needs of pet-owning families."

"As a pet owner, I feel it is a valuable service," said Bishop, who is also the co-faculty advisor for the program. "Students gain additional education and experience working with end-of-life issues. It's great they have the opportunity to learn these skills so early in their education."

But the education is not just for students. Families and their doctors can also learn a lot from the program

"Clients gain more confidence in taking care of their beloved animal companion," Bishop said. "We support and educated the client to better take care of their animal."

Bishop said the program has started out small, and only deals with small animals for the time being. She said the program has had to overcome budget cuts since it was visualized in June 2002.

Stirling said the Bohemian Foundation serves as a funding source through grants, and the program supported by faculty and the Student Chapter of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

"We are on the cutting edge," Bishop said. "We are making a difference in the country."