

# Frail and elderly maintain beloved pets with help from community



Sometimes the people who would most benefit from the companionship of a pet find it difficult to fully attend to a pet's needs, and this is particularly true for older people or people with illness or disabilities. Council's supporting and encouraging volunteer programs that address this disparity are creating healthier communities.

Initiatives such as the Pet Companion Program in Knox and surrounding areas of Victoria, aim to provide support to older people and people with disabilities who require pet care assistance. The program is funded by the Department of Human Services and underpinned by the dedicated work of many volunteers.

"The program supports people who may come from lonely or isolated environments," says Rosie Nelson, Program Coordinator for the Pet Companion Program.

*"They might not have family, or the family they do have live in another state or country. The volunteers not only help to sustain the relationship that they have with their pet, but bring some light into their day."*

*Rosie Nelson, Pet Companion Program*

Volunteers visit pet owners in their home to provide assistance with dog walking, pet bathing and grooming and transporting clients and their pets to veterinary visits. Clients are responsible for paying veterinary fees as well as the cost associated with dog grooming facilities but the program is provided free of charge.

"When I match our client with a volunteer we often find that the relationship between the two becomes very strong," said Rosie. "Even if the pet passes away, our volunteers will often continue to visit."

The program attracts a large variety of volunteers who live in the Knox area, including retired people, young mums, and full and part time workers, many of whom have been matched into the program for years.



*"At the moment we have around 100 clients and 101 volunteers. Every now and then we'll pull everyone together to have a volunteer social. We're always surprised at how many people turn up for them and how successful these occasions are!"*

*Rosie Nelson*

Programs such as the Pets Companion program are a win-win for both the clients and the volunteers who get immense satisfaction from participating. In addition, there are broader benefits in terms of the strengthened civil fabric of a community where people help each other and economic savings associated with helping people to live independently in their homes for longer.

## Benefits of volunteers in suburban settings

- Helps people who may be isolated or marginalised to feel part of the community and benefit from the companionship provided by pets
- Creates opportunities for local residents to contribute to their community by volunteering
- Assists pet owners to harvest the benefits of pet ownership while receiving social and practical support
- Delivers economic savings associated to people living independently

## Tips

- Support any existing local volunteer groups or consider helping the local community to develop a program if none exists
- Develop links between local animal welfare agencies, veterinarians, pet shops and volunteer groups
- Encourage the local community to volunteer

## Web Links

**Knox Community Volunteers**

- <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~knxvols>

**Companion Animal Volunteer Support Program (CAVS)**

- [www.balwynwelfare.org.au/services.aspx](http://www.balwynwelfare.org.au/services.aspx)