

MEDIA RELEASE

22 June 2009

Healthy communities created by pets

The latest findings on what it takes to have a healthy community have been released today with the launch of handbook *Living Well Together*, at the Australian Local Government Association conference in Canberra.

Edited by Dr Lisa Wood from the Centre for the Built Environment and Health at the University of Western Australia, *Living Well Together* reveals the role pets have in creating social capital.

“Our original research, published in the *Journal for Social Science and Medicine* in 2005, showed that pets acted as a lubricant for social contact and interaction. The research found that pet owners were more likely to exchange favours with neighbours, to be involved in community issues and to create and benefit from higher levels of what is called ‘social capital’, says Dr Wood.

“Other research from the University demonstrated the role dogs have in motivating their owners to be more physically active. This has a flow-on benefit to the overall health of the owner and the dog.

“With growing concerns both within Australia and around the world about the erosion of community well-being, these findings led us to look at how communities are working together to make the most of the benefits pets offer.

“Once we started looking, we were staggered to find just how many examples there were of pets helping people from every walk of life. I’m sure that with the release of this publication, we’ll find many more programs,” says Dr Wood.

Some of the examples in *Living Well Together* are:

- Follow My Lead: an initiative of the Stirling Council in Western Australia to help bring more seniors, women and young people into the Council’s physical activity programs. There are now more than 17 walking groups that involve people whether they have a dog or not. Follow My Lead is largely run by volunteers.
- Three C’s: a “Canines, Coffee and Conversation” program run by the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association in South Australia in conjunction with the Holdfast City Council. The program involves regular gatherings of dog owners and their pets and allows Council to recommend it to owners who may need to socialize their dog in a safe environment.
- PetLinks: a program run in conjunction with the City of Port Phillip in Victoria where volunteers visit older or isolated members of the community to help care for their pets. The personal contact is important in maintaining links between members of the community and identifying when extra care may be required.
- BowMeow: a program that matches volunteers with pet owners who need assistance in caring for their pet while they are in hospital. The program services the inner city suburbs of Sydney and is supported by the Leichardt Council.

- Dogs on the Domain: an annual event hosted by the Hobart City Council as part of the Premier of Tasmania's Get Walking campaign. Hundreds of people and their dogs participate in this event.
- The development of a policy to allow pets into a retirement community at Hope Island in Queensland. The residents in the community wanted to spend more time with their pets and the policy, developed with the assistance of a veterinary behaviourist, has made this possible.
- A dog health program in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory has significantly reduced the incidence of dog bites and contamination of households from dog waste. The health of dogs has also improved.
- The introduction of volunteer walkers at the Domestic Animal Shelter in the Australian Capital Territory contributed to a 65% reduction in euthanasia rates and increased activity and interaction for the volunteers. Last year, over 95% of dogs available for re-homing were placed in a new home.

"The handbook shows how pet ownership has resulted in benefits for different members of the community: families, older people, children and individuals. It also provides practical advice on how to get similar programs happening in your area," says Dr Wood.

Living Well Together can be downloaded at no cost from www.petnet.com.au

(ENDS)

Issued by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service

Available for interview: Dr Lisa Wood
Centre for the Built Environment and Health
University of Western Australia
Contact Jill Hollingworth on the number below

Susie Willis
Petcare Information and Advisory Service
02 9555 9670

Other media enquiries: Jill Hollingworth, Tango PR, 0419 508 597

Australia – A Nation of Pet Lovers

Australia is a nation of pet lovers. It is estimated that 63% of Australian households have some type of pet with 53% of households owning a dog or a cat.

Over many years, Australian and international research has shown that owning pets can help improve a person's mental and physical health, reduce the effects of stress, help children learn about responsibility, facilitate social interaction between people and build a sense of community.

The Petcare Information & Advisory Service (PIAS) is funded by Mars Petcare Australia as part of its commitment to socially responsible pet ownership. PIAS' website: www.petnet.com.au provides information on the responsible and enjoyable ownership of pets. The site is suitable for children, although PIAS encourages parents to supervise any online access by their children.