

In home volunteer pet care programs provides elderly with independent living and stress relief



There is growing momentum in Australia to help older people live independently and remain in their own homes. Pets provide a source of companionship, physical contact and antidote to stress and bereavement for older people,⁶⁰ but in some instances, their owners may struggle to meet the pet's needs or access timely veterinary assistance.

Benefits of delivering to the elderly using formal organisations

- Health and well-being of elderly people may be maintained and improved through caring for and bonding with a pet
- Assist in reducing burden on the health care system

Staff at St Joseph's Hospital teamed up with RSPCA NSW to establish the Pets of Older Persons (POOPs) program in 2003, catering to pet owners in palliative care and those over the age of 65 who don't have family to support them.

The Aged Care Assessment Team at St Joseph's Hospital at Auburn have found that the bond between the elderly and their pet or pets is so great that the elderly person will defer or refuse medical attention (for example, an in-patient stay) as they do not want to leave their pets alone and may be unable to afford the costs of boarding.

Programs like POOPs enable the elderly and their animal companions to remain healthy and happy in their homes by assisting with the routine care of pets including grooming and walking; organising veterinary attention; and providing emergency boarding or foster care of the pet if the owner requires medical attention. If the owner's situation changes to the point where they require constant in-patient care and cannot look after their pets, their pets are re-homed through the RSPCA.

"Pets are extremely important to elderly people.

Sometimes their pet is the only thing left in their life that they can count on. As people get older they may feel that they can't contribute as much to society, so being able to look after a pet gives them a sense of purpose.

Some rely on their pet to get them out of bed every morning."

Dr Magdoline Awad, RSPCA NSW.

Dr Awad said the bond between elderly people and their pets was so strong that some dementia sufferers were able to recognise their pet even when they could not recognise close family members.

Elderly pet owners are referred to POOPs from a variety of sources including social workers, community nurses, carers, veterinarians, RSPCA inspectors, Council Rangers and community groups. Since the program's inception, the number of referrals have increased considerably and numbered over 200 in 2007.

Indirectly, programs such as POOPS also contribute to healthcare savings for the community.

"If we can help people keep their pets and live at home for longer then there is less strain on the health care system."

Dr Magdoline Awad,



Tips

- Determine which volunteer services currently exist in the area and support and promote
- Identify community residents in need and link to identified volunteer programs
- Promote service through Council media tools

Web Links

POOPS at RSPCA - www.rspcansw.org.au