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Top Stories

Paging Dr. Fido... Healing goes to the dogs

By: DIANA LADDEN 05/12/2006

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HUDSON-"Temperament is the key to a good therapy dog," says Susan Fireman, Good Dog Foundation executive trainer and coordinator.

"And this is the first thing I do when I meet a prospective therapy dog." She strides across the room to Good Dog Friday, a silver-gray lurcher-a cross between a greyhound or a whippet and other breeds-perched elegantly on the couch next to his owner, Good Dog volunteer Diana King.

Ms. Fireman grabs Friday and smothers him in an affectionate hug. In return, Friday smiles and leans his head against her.

"If a dog flinches at a hug, he's not for us," says Ms. Fireman.

"And our dogs," she adds fiercely, "do not wear costumes-ever."

What Friday and the other Good Dogs canines do is visit patients in hospitals, hospices and senior centers. They also help kids learn to read.

Dogs with the proper temperament, which includes all breeds and mixes, are welcome. "We actually have two Jack Russells in the program," says Ms. King with a triumphant grin.

The Good Dog Foundation, which provides and co-ordinates therapy dog services for more than 77,000 people each year in 70 facilities in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut as well as at disaster sites around the country, has recently expanded into Columbia, Dutchess and Greene counties. And Ms. Fireman, Friday and their colleagues are looking for more volunteers, human and canine, to visit nearby facilities clamoring for Good Dogs' services.

The first local class graduated in November, and Good Dogs has begun Columbia Memorial Hospital in Hudson and several institutions in Dutchess County.

Jane Ehrlich, the president and CEO of Columbia Memorial, praises the program. "Therapy dogs help patients connect with the outside world and distract them from their illness-related discomfort and anxiety. In a hectic clinical environment, they help stimulate patients to focus on recovery and returning home," she says.

For many years, the effect therapy dogs had on patients was largely anecdotal, but a recent American Heart Association study shows that a 12-minute dog visit

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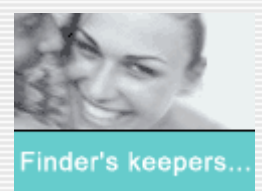
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lowered blood pressure and reduced the production of damaging hormones in cardiac patients and those with hypertension.

The Good Dog Foundation was created in by Brooklyn resident Rachel McPherson in 1999, just two years before September 11. After the attacks, Good Dog volunteers worked extensively with grieving families at the Family Assistance Center and with exhausted rescue workers.

Ms. McPherson, originally from Mississippi, is a filmmaker whose first film, a documentary called *Signal Through the Flames*, was nominated for an Academy Award.

Good Dog offers an in-depth, 10-week training program run by experienced trainers. Ms. Fireman, for example, has two dogs ranked nationally in the top 101 American Kennel Club obedience class competition, one dog ranked fourth and one seventh.

The human volunteers also receive training. The 10 training sessions teach the skills dogs and their handlers need to participate in animal assisted therapy, including how to comfortably interact with patients in a variety of situations.

"Dogs are trained, through positive reinforcement only, to hone their temperaments and gain the necessary mannerisms and skills to navigate a healthcare environment and become a therapeutic assistance to someone in need," said Ms. Fireman. Teams are tested and evaluated throughout the training course and certified upon completion. Volunteers are monitored and assisted on their first few therapy visits, have ongoing support and are re-certified on a yearly basis. After certification, the bottom-line commitment is one hour a month.

There is a one-time fee of \$350 for training and yearly re-certification. The Good Dog Foundation enters into contracts with the participating facilities, which covers insurance costs for volunteers.

After the volunteers and dogs are trained and she gets to know them, Ms. Fireman matches the volunteer teams to situations that suit them. "Not everyone is perfect for hospice work, but that person might love helping kids learn to read," says Ms. Fireman. "Some volunteers love to work with pediatric patients."

Ms. Fireman emphasizes that no volunteer is allowed to visit patients until he or she is ready. "We even do role-playing so people know what to expect and how to deal with it," she says.

Volunteers report to the organization after their visits and dogs are allowed to work only in hour-long intervals. "The work can be exhausting for the dogs," says Ms. Fireman, "which is why we also train our volunteers to administer relaxation techniques-canine yoga and stretches."

The Good Dog Foundation continues to evolve. Recently, a group of certified Good Dog Teams came together to undergo special training for Disaster Response and Crisis Intervention in the inaugural session of The Good Dog Foundation's newly formed Disaster Response Program.

Ms. King gives Friday a hug. He loves having a job, she says. "When I get out his Good Dog scarf, he knows it is time to go to work," she says. "In this situation, we really get back more than we give."

For more information or to sign up for Good Dog training, call Susan Fireman at (518) 398-5249 or the Good Dog Foundation at (818) 788-2988 or toll-free at (888) 859-9992.

To contact reporter Diana Ladden, e-mail dladden@indenews.com.

Science supports visits' value

NEW RESEARCH from UCLA says that a visit with a dog could be "just what the doctor ordered" for heart patients in the hospital.

On its website (www.americanheart.org), the American Heart Association reports that researchers studied 12-minute visits between dogs and 76 patients hospitalized for heart failure. Patients were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a visit from a human volunteer and a dog; a visit with a human volunteer only; or no visit at all.

In the group that received the human volunteer/dog visits, the dogs would lie on the bed so patients could touch the dog while interacting with the dog and the volunteer.

Researchers measured such things as heart and lung function and the presence of various related chemicals in the bloodstream. They also administered anxiety tests before and after the visit.

The results showed that visits with the dogs improved heart and lung function by lowering blood pressure, reducing the release of harmful stress hormones and decreasing anxiety by 24% among the patients.

Patients who received visits from people but not animals showed a 10%

improvement based on the same standards. There was no change in patients who did not receive visitors.

Study author Kathie Cole, RN, from UCLA, says, "It definitely lends credibility to the field of animal-assisted therapy. It validates what we thought to be true in regard to how it makes patients feel, and instead of just being a nicety, it's a validated intervention."

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