

The Brody Project - Man's Best Friend



Therapists use animals in a variety of ways to help patients heal. Below: Karen Lasker

Across the country, therapists increasingly employ animals to help improve the health and well-being of human patients. Locally, the Naples-based Brody Project provides animal-assisted therapy (AAT) at Moorings Park and The Shelter for Abused Women & Children. The project also seeks to teach people about the fundamental human-animal bond.

The Brody Project matches trained and certified dogs and cats with medical professionals who use the animals to aid patients in therapy sessions. The animals help people with issues involving psychosocial interaction, motor skills, balance, endurance, memory, range of motion and sensory stimulation. They motivate patients to participate in sessions that can be taxing. For instance, a stroke patient with limited movement may continually unbuckle and rebuckle a dog's collar or throw a ball for a dog to retrieve, which can be more enjoyable than traditional exercises like placing pegs into holes. When patients enjoy their therapy, they accomplish more faster.



KAREN LASKER NOTES THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND IS WHAT MAKES THERAPY EFFECTIVE.

Brody Project animals and handlers must be accredited by the Delta Society, one of numerous AAT providers across the country. In addition to basic training, the animal must "be highly social, exhibit exceptional levels of impulse control, and must be adaptable to different workplaces and situations," according to the Southwest Florida Dog Trainers Alliance, Naples.

The Alliance provides animal-assisted activities (AAA) training through the program PAWS For Love Therapy Dogs. Note that AAA and AAT have significant differences. The Delta Society defines AAT to be "a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service.

professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession."

AAA, on the other hand, does not include specific treatment goals and is not monitored by a health professional. Rather, AAA is geared toward casual meetings in which residents in a facility enjoy the company of a pet.

An AAT-certified animal also differs from a service dog. According to the Americans With Disabilities Act, a service dog is "individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability." These dogs are permitted to enter all public places, while a therapy animal only works under the direction of a medical professional and cannot enter public establishments that don't allow pets.

While AAT benefits patients, it also gives the animals and handlers a sense of satisfaction. According to Karen Lasker, execu-



tive director of The Brody Project, "Animals get excited to wear the vest [they receive upon certification]. Every animal needs a job; they go to these [therapy sessions] ready to go to work."

At the core of AAT is the importance of the human-animal bond and related health benefits. As Lasker says, "the bond is what makes the therapy work." The Brody Project's mission is to raise awareness about this bond and encourage people to become pet owners. The group holds workshops and hires experts to spread awareness about the impact of animal love on human health.