

Pet Therapy Offers Comfort to Hospice Life Care Patients Feb. 2011

written by Jean Zaleski, Director of Community Resource Development

Because of their special innocence and their unconditional love for others, therapy dogs have a unique and powerful way of connecting with and nurturing people. Hospice has recognized this extraordinary complementary therapy of using specially trained and certified dogs to visit with interested patients and their families. Bud, the Hospice Life Care (HLC) therapy dog, is considered a precious and effective member of the Hospice team.

Research shows that pet therapy helps to decrease anxiety, often resulting in a reduction in the need for pain management and an increase in the willingness of patients to talk about their feelings and express them to families and professionals. Pets also allow people to focus, even for short periods of time, on something other than themselves. For those people with physical or cognitive challenges, the visit from a therapy dog can have an amazing effect. Seeing Bud prompts pleasant memories of past pets that have been companions in childhood or in adulthood. People will often begin recounting stories of their own beloved pet. Patients with end stage Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease, who have stopped communicating verbally, have often started smiling, reaching out and speaking to the dog at the therapy visit. Imagine the comfort of the dog resting his head on a lap or cuddling along the side of a bedbound patient.

Every other week, Bud the Hospice Life Care therapy dog and his owner and Hospice volunteer Diane Roeder visit and brighten the day of HLC patients at the Soldiers Home Holyoke. Patients and clinicians, alike are always happy to see Bud and give him a pat. One of the nurses, Denise Annino remarked, "People really relate to dogs. A visit can help calm or cheer up their day and decrease the focus of any stage of illness. Having a volunteer Hospice dog is wonderful, so very therapeutic."

Bud brings out the opportunity to connect emotionally and spiritually, all in a non-judgmental way. It is just about the moment. A simple snuggle and pat can help a patient take their mind off of pain, worries or other distressing symptoms, thus improving quality of life for that very special moment.

Therapy dogs often do their best work with people who do not want to talk or cannot speak. Bud's initial, exceptional patient connections have, at times, paved the way for more interactions and conversations for the HLC nurses and social workers. According to Leslie Hennessey, the HLC Volunteer Coordinator, "Bud has gently assisted to progress conversations from the small talk to the big talk that is so often needed."

Diane Roeder, an RN and Hospice Volunteer, adds that "Bud does his best work when someone reaches out to him. Visits can be very magical." "In some respects, Bud thinks that he is there for *his* therapy!" "He would volunteer forty hours a week."

If you believe that end of life can be a positive and enriching experience and you have time to provide support for others in need, contact Leslie Hennessey at 413-533-3923 ext. 1281 or lhennessey@holyokevna.org to learn about the next volunteer training session which begins on

April 25th, 2011 and will meet every Monday morning from 9am to 12pm for 5 weeks.



Caption: Soldiers Home Holyoke nurse, Denise Annino is greeted warmly by Bud, the HLC therapy dog, as his owner and Hospice volunteer; Diane Roeder RN shares the moment