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Pet therapy provides comfort to the elderly - An increasing number of senior care centers are opening their doors to companion animals such as therapy dogs. Research has shown regular contact with animals can help elders with medical conditions.

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For Lya Fernandez, 84, seeing dogs around her nursing home in Kendall remind her of being young.

"I had a Chihuahua, a Pekingese and four terriers," Fernandez said. "Dogs are caring and accompanying. I like that they visit every week."

An increasing number of senior care centers, places that once wouldn't let anything with fur in the front door, now welcome companion animals.

Because research has shown some seniors benefit from regular contact with animals, such privileges are expanding to assisted living and nursing units where elders have mild to serious medical conditions.

Fernandez is a resident at Palace Nursing and Rehabilitation in Kendall. On Thursdays, volunteers from Therapy Dogs, Inc., bring their personal dogs to visit with the residents. In order to become certified therapy dogs, volunteers must bring their dogs a few times to be evaluated. Arlene Tenel, a tester and observer for Therapy Dogs, Inc., said that to be certified, the dogs must be "mannered, friendly and neither aggressive or shy."

Though volunteers go to each room to offer a visit from their furry pals, Fernandez followed along in her wheelchair to enjoy her morning with the crowd.

Ana Maria Perez, 103, blows kisses to call over Bliss, a black Labrador.

"The dogs love everyone," Perez said. "Look at them, they're so pretty," she said as she let Bliss lick her cheek.

Nursing and assisted-living homes are allowing pets for another reason, too: It's good for business. Allowing pets is an amenity consumers want, like transportation and flexible meal plans.

A Place for Mom, the nation's largest senior housing placement company, says about 40 percent of its callers now ask about pet policies. "More and more, we have families indicating up front that [allowing pets] is a must-have criteria," said senior vice president Tami Cummings told the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

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It's not just traditional pets that are making guest appearances at elder facilities.

Personal Ponies, a non-profit group in Coconut Creek, sends Shetland ponies into nursing homes, schools and hospitals to work with seniors and children with special needs.

In the past, facilities cited health regulations when barring animals. But the two Florida agencies that inspect or monitor nursing homes and assisted living said no rules prohibit companion animals. Infection control, environmental or resident rights issues due to pets are dealt with on an individual basis.

Debbie Horovitz, activities director at the Palace, said she wouldn't change the 10 a.m. activity on Thursdays.

"Do you see how their faces just light up?" she said. "I've seen residents with no emotion at all, and all of a sudden, a smile, a word."

While the therapy dogs are walking around, residents have different ways of calling the dogs. Some hold out their hands, some simply smile and others, like Carmen Martinez, 82, call them over.

"Hey, hey, hey," Martinez said, calling over Jonah, a mutt with his owner, Fred Abramoff.

"It's great seeing how a dog will come in and their whole reaction will change," Abramoff, a Kendall resident, said.

Gerald Schickman, a retired Miami-Dade professor who lives in Kendall, visits the Palace every week with his yellow lab, Sam. He said the visits benefit Sam just as much as the residents.

"Dogs need a purpose in life, it helps keep them healthy," Schickman said. "And the resident, he brings them joy and happiness."

Some places are even allowing permanent house pets, and dogs aren't the only ones.

At the Clare Bridge Alzheimer's care unit at the Homewood Residence in Delray Beach, residents adopted Scout, a large black stray cat missing a foot, from an animal rescue group.

Scout now has a box of toys, two beds and a regular spot on the Clare Bridge activities calendar. Residents gather to pet him, discuss his care or play with him — things designed to stimulate their memories and get them out of their chairs.

The eight women at Scout's session one recent morning smiled and nodded when asked if they once had a dog or cat. One called out the name of her pet, gone for many years, as Scout played with a feather on a string.

Ken Martin, of Aventura, saw his mother smile when he asked her if Scout made her think of Sam, their longtime family cat. "Every morning, Sam would jump on my mother's stomach and she loved him to death," Martin told the Sun Sentinel. "I think Scout makes her more responsive and brings her happiness and joy."

Some elders adopt a pet after moving to an assisted living facility because they couldn't have one in their retirement condo. Others bring their pets with them.

"It's traumatic enough to have to come from your independent apartment to one room here," said Melodie Fritzinger, administrator of John Knox Village's Gardens West assisted living center. Being pet-friendly "is good for our residents and makes things more homelike," she said.

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