

# PetPals: Enhancing the Nursing Home Environment



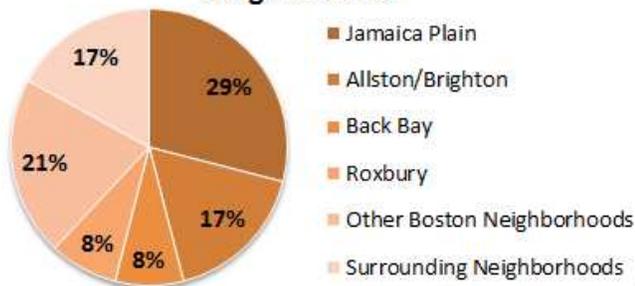
## Program Fact Sheet

### Background

Considerable research has been conducted evaluating animal-assisted activity and therapy programs. The benefits of these programs include decreasing the loneliness and depression of nursing home residents, and improvement in mental functions.

Since 2003, the PetPals program has been a key component of FriendshipWorks' elder services. The PetPals program consists of visits of specially trained and screened handlers and their pets to approximately 36 nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult day care facilities in the Boston area.

**Facilities Receiving PetPals Visits by Neighborhood**



### Project and Research Description

In the summer of 2010, an assessment of the program and its effects on recipients and providers of the pet therapy was performed by two veterinary students from Tufts University.

The aim of the study was to look at the effect of pet visitation on the mood of nursing home residents, as well as ascertain the reactions of handlers and staff at the facilities. The study utilized surveys and interviews to measure the effectiveness and quality of the PetPals program.

### Findings

The PetPals program from FriendshipWorks is widely appreciated for the tangible emotional benefits it brings to all parties. Facility liaisons feel the program is a valuable part of their offered activities and notice observable outcomes in their residents. Staff members report seeing definable, positive changes in the individuals who participate and that the visits' effects can last all day.

- **90.9%** of staff said residents look forward to the weekly PetPals' visit
- **95.5%** reported that residents exhibited a better mood during/after a PetPals visit
- **81.8%** reported that residents were more outgoing and interactive during and/or after a visit

In addition, the visits are seen as having a positive effect on the general atmosphere of the entire facility. Staff members themselves experience an enhanced mood and wellbeing during and after a PetPals team's visit.

- **95.5%** feel PetPals' visits have a positive impact on the general atmosphere of the facility
- **57.2%** said the positive impact lasted for hours afterward

The average elderly resident receiving PetPals is older, female, and White. The program, however, reaches a diverse group of elders (25% Black/African American, 13% other racial groups) and a number of individuals using the program are male (31%). The program design, or perhaps the presence of animals, draws in residents who are not scheduled to meet with the volunteer/pet team.



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- o **47.2%** of volunteers said more residents than were scheduled would stop by during their visit

Wagging tags can connect with some isolated residents in ways that no human ever could. Staff members from several facilities commented that some people who don't participate in any other activities do participate in PetPals, emphasizing the ability of animals to serve as a bridge for personal and social interactions. This is particularly true for male residents, who often do not find other activities as engaging. The PetPals teams had the ability to reach cognitively challenged participants. Patients with dementia respond favorably to interactions with the PetPals teams.

- o **77.0%** said that people who don't participate in any other activities, participate in PetPals (See quotes below)

*“Some residents are room-bound or aren't interested in other things. They may refuse to leave room, but the dog comes to them.”*

*“She's a burn victim [and] uncomfortable in public, but the dog doesn't care how she looks.”*

*“Some [residents] are not cognitively able [to join other activities], or can't hear. Pets just need to be there to help.”*

Elderly participants thought the PetPals program made the facilities feel “more like home” and reminded them of happy memories

of previously owned pets. Many participants describe developing relationships with the PetPals volunteers, in addition to enjoying the visit from the pet.

- o **56.0%** of participants said that they would feel upset or sad if PetPals didn't visit
- o **88.5%** of participants indicated having PetPals made them feel more at home/ comfortable in the facility
- o **94.0%** of residents who participated in the program previously owned pets

In terms of program satisfaction, elders who participate in PetPals enjoy it and rank it very highly among the activities offered at the facility.

- o **62.6%** ranked PetPals as the #1 or #2 activity out of typically 8 activities
- o **90.0%** of program participants were satisfied or very satisfied with PetPals

## Conclusion

Because animal-assisted activities have the potential to increase the perception of quality of life, provide pleasure to nursing home residents and increase mental and psychosocial measures, the PetPals program has the ability to make a difference in participants' lives. The results of this assessment show that FriendshipWorks' program touches the lives of staff and residents each time the volunteer/pet team visits the facility. FriendshipWorks continues to enhance the program in order to continue benefiting participants, facility staff, volunteers, and pets.

This Fact Sheet was created August 2012 and can be found at [www.fw4elders.org](http://www.fw4elders.org)