

Exploring the Health Benefits of Companion Animals on Older Adults

Connecting Senior Companion Animals With Senior Citizens

Tag Words: Elderly, Pets, Companion Animals, Human-Animal Bond, Pet Adoption, Adoption, Senior Pets, Senior Dogs, Animal Shelters, Senior Citizens, Senior Centers, Adult Living, Assisted Living, Euthanasia Alternative, Seniors for Seniors

Authors: Matt Long and Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D.

Summary: Companion animals can do wonders for people, especially older adults. Living with a pet can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as lower blood pressure, heart rate and stress. However, the increased costs of owning an animal may discourage seniors on a fixed income from considering a furry companion. We can help our senior citizens by requesting animal shelters to waive adoption fees (potentially of “senior”, less adoptable, pets), requesting that veterinarians lower their fees for seniors and incorporating resident pets in senior facilities.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/0RWTxa0zQhk>

The Issue: Senior Pets can Promote Health and Well-Being in the Elderly

In older adults, a pet animal could be a possible source of friendship and companionship, which could help alleviate symptoms of loneliness, isolation, and grief. Studies have shown that just fifteen minutes of interaction with an animal can stimulate hormone release, increasing levels of cortisol and serotonin in the body. These hormones are useful for lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and stress levels. By interacting with an animal over a long period of time, a person could see a steady decrease in cholesterol levels, depression, and may even be protected against heart disease and stroke (1).

Human-Animal Bond

In recent years, more research has focused on exploring the potential health benefits associated with the human-animal bond. We do not fully understand the health benefits that come along with owning a pet. Although most of us view pets as a companion, friend, or even a family member, there is much more that can be benefited from by owning a pet. We are just beginning to understand the way in which the relationship between humans and animals can affect the health and well-being of humans and animals. The American Veterinarian Medical Association has stated that the human-animal bond has existed for thousands of years; that it is important to client and community health, and is important in the field of veterinary medicine because it fulfills both human and animal needs (2).

The Health Benefits of Owning a Pet

The older adult is in greater need for companionship than any other age demographic. By taking on the responsibility of owning a pet, an older adult can achieve this sense of companionship, as well as so much more. Even with the most menial of tasks, a pet can provide an older adult with increased physical activity, socialization, and engagement. It can give them a greater sense of

security, love, affection, and companionship. All of this can keep a person healthy, meaning fewer trips to the doctor, and decreased medical costs (3). There are many professional doctors who have witnessed firsthand the benefits of the human-animal bond and its impact on the health of their patients. Psychologist Penny B. Donnenfeld stated, "I've seen those with memory loss interact and access memories from long ago. Having a pet helps the senior focus on something other than physical problems and negative preoccupations about loss or aging" (4). Dr. Jay P. Granat, a New Jersey therapist also believes that the ownership of an animal is beneficial for its owner just by its presence. He states "Dogs—and other pets—live very much in the here and now. They don't worry about tomorrow. And tomorrow can be very scary for an older person. By having an animal with that sense of now, it tends to rub off on people" (4). However, there are many challenges to owning pets that people usually do not take into consideration.

The Challenges of Owning a Pet for Older Adults

As people get older, their physical and mental restrictions tend to restrict them from wanting to try new things. They are often very limited in their mobility due to aging or injured joints, and are often restricted in their ability to function independently due to many neurological diseases. The most common chronically impairing diseases of the elderly, especially those that would affect one's ability to care for a pet, are arthritis, osteoporosis, dementia, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, cataracts, and depression. When faced with diagnoses such as these, there is generally a feeling of loss of freedom in elderly patients, as well as a loss of the sense of hope. This can lead to many older adults refusing to seek help for fear of embarrassment and of their loss of independence (5). The loss of one's independence can essentially become a self-fulfilling prophecy, where one internalizes the severity of their disability. Although owning a pet may be beneficial for their health, many of them consider their disability to be too much of a hindrance to hold that responsibility. However, the real difficulty in owning a pet rests in their belief that they are not capable of caring for a pet because of their disability when they are usually perfectly capable of doing so (6).

The Cost of Owning a Pet

The other most deterring challenge of owning a pet rests in the cost of owning and maintaining the health of a pet. With the cost of adoption from pet shelters being relatively expensive, and the cost of supplies and veterinary care skyrocketing, it can be very daunting for an older adult, especially one that may be retired, to be inclined to take on the responsibility of pet ownership. The cost of owning a dog ranges from \$1,314 to \$1,843 a year, depending on its size and includes the costs for food, medication, toys, litter, health insurance, spay/neutering, collars/leashes, cages/crates, training, and grooming (7). This can be very intimidating for someone that is financially unstable or unwilling to pay the cost. However, there are some alternatives. There are many pets that cost even less, and are less maintenance, which may be beneficial to owners that are more physically limited in their ability to care for an animal. For example, the annual cost of caring for a rabbit might be \$1,055, \$1,035 for a cat, and \$705 for a guinea pig. If an owner wanted a pet with lower costs and very little physical maintenance, they could get a fish, which may cost \$235 a year.

However, there are also many unanticipated costs associated with owning a pet. Especially in pets that are aging, there are many health issues that are common in aging pets, especially dogs. In aging dogs, the most common health issues include kidney and liver disease, more frequent

intestinal problems, prostate disease, testicular cancer, breast cancer, infected uterus, diabetes, arthritis, degenerative joint disease, as well as cognitive problems (8). The fees associated with these diseases can be very intimidating, especially to elderly adults that are researching the possibility of pet ownership. However, with the increasing popularity of pet insurance, these fees are becoming more and more affordable for the average owner.

Making Pet Ownership More Affordable

With the increasing cost of healthcare, especially in the field of veterinary medicine, people have begun to turn more to the option of pet insurance to ensure the well-being of their pets. It helps to cover unforeseen accidents and illnesses that may occur (9). By promoting the use of health insurance for pets, it may persuade people to consider the adoption of pets, especially older pets, as an economically viable option. Additionally, allowing pets to be “prescribable” may prove to be beneficial for patients. Health care professionals could use animals the same way they use medication. By “prescribing” patients animals as an alternative treatment for depression, isolation, grief, etc. they can help to promote the adoption of pets, especially in the elderly population (10). Also, when visiting the veterinarian, veterinarians could begin to subsidize veterinary costs for seniors in an effort to increase the rate of dogs being adopted. As a benefit to them, they could write off their expenses as donations for their tax season (11). However, the most effective way to make adoption more affordable is for the shelters themselves to assist individuals in affording the costs associated with owning a pet. By reducing the cost of adoptions, or even completely waiving fees associated with adoption, shelters may increase rates of adoption, lower levels of euthanasia, and increase public relations towards the adoption center.

How Shelters Can Make Adoptions More Appealing and Affordable

Although there has already been many programs established by shelter facilities to help assist adopters with affording the cost of owning a dog, there should be more shelters compliant with giving older adults more benefits to increase their adoption rates. By increasing adoption rates, then can also decrease rates of euthanasia, Shelters may be able to find financial support to cover the loss of money from waiving or helping to pay for these adoption fees through donations from pet care/nutrition manufacturers or other charitable groups.

What Shelters Are Already Doing

Many shelters area have already begun giving out many benefits to seniors adopting animals through their facility. Some facilities have established programs to match senior pets that are normally difficult to adopt with senior citizens. Others will match senior citizens with pets based on what makes them most comfortable. One such example is the Animal League Seniors for Seniors Pet Adoption Program, which strives to match a senior pet with a senior citizen. This program offers many amenities such as the waiving of the adoption fee, 10% off pet products in their store, two free grooming annually, free vaccinations, exams, and minor procedures. They also provide discounts on preventative procedures and diagnostic tests (12). Another program is Muttville’s Seniors for Seniors program, which also waives the \$200 adoption fee, provides a “Senior Welcome Kit” which contains a leash, collar, bed, food medications, and other amenities (13). Another program is Petfinder’s Pets for Senior Citizens program. They strive to find a compatible pet for the adopter from their shelter or another shelter if a match cannot be found. They will also take the animal back if it does not work out, refunding their adoption fee or attempting to help them to find a more suitable animal. As far as fees go, they give senior

citizens half-off the cost of adoption as well as providing start-up supplies, free transportation to take the pet to the veterinarian or groomer, vaccinations, spay/neutering, deworming, microchip, amongst other services. The program will even take care of the animal if the adopter needs to spend time in the hospital or nursing home, and also have funds collected through private or public donations available for veterinarian emergencies. For an elderly person, benefits such as these would definitely give an elderly person much peace of mind from worrying about their pet's well-being and comfort (14).

The Cost of Sheltering a Dog

One such shelter, the Butte Humane Society Animal Shelter states that the average cost per animal handled within their facility is \$130 based on 6,029 animals, with each animal staying in the shelter for an average of 11 to 12 days. Around the country, the average cost per animal averages around \$150 to \$250 per animal for open door shelters and \$350 to \$450 for no-kill shelters (15, 16). These figures do not even include the expenses for emergency medical care for the animals. Many shelters, especially no-kill shelters hold their animals for as long as they can until they find them a loving home. This makes the cost of holding the animal increase everyday, with many dogs staying in the shelter for an indefinite amount of time before they are adopted.

Another facility, the Delaware Valley Golden Retriever Rescue, spends more than \$2,000 per dog to make sure that every dog within their facility is in good health and up to date in shots, vaccinations, undergoes diagnostic testing, behavioral training, and grooming. This does not even include the costs of staff support, food, bedding, etc. Although not all facilities are expected to be as thorough as this facility, it shows just what lengths some shelters go to make sure their dogs are properly cared for and ready to be adopted (17).

Other facilities that use euthanasia not only have to deal with the emotional ramifications of euthanizing an animal, but also the fees associated with either using gas or injections to put an animal down. The cost to euthanize each animal ranged from \$2.29 to 4.98\$ per animal (18). When there are many animals coming in and out of the facility, these costs have the chance to multiply exponentially. By helping an animal find a home quickly, the facility will greatly decrease its expenditures, as well as enable the animal to live out their life with their needs taken care of. By establishing programs for senior citizens with benefits to persuade them to adopt a pet from the shelter facility, the pets will be adopted out faster, and euthanasia may eventually become an unnecessary option.

What Senior Centers Can Do

Although there are many elderly adults that are capable of living independently, the demographic that is the hardest to reach is those that are living within senior care facilities. Many senior care facilities have strict regulations that prohibit the ownership of animals due to health regulations and their inability to regulate and care for the animals properly. However, recently, many senior care centers have now begun to allow for their residents to bring their companion animals in to live with them. Because of the research showing that seniors benefit from interacting with animals, seniors with conditions ranging from mild to severe have been given the privilege of owning their own companion animal within assisted living or nursing home facilities. Yet, there are still many facilities that do not cater to companion animals because of their strict health regulations. However, with the increased number of facilities allowing pets to live there, it shows

that it is a feasible endeavor for them to consider. There are many options that these senior care centers can consider. They can cater to the needs of their residents by allowing them to bring their pets in. Many senior living communities have regulated this by having a Pet Care Coordinator to ensure that all pets are properly cared for and are up-to-date on their veterinary care (1). Other facilities, such as the Clare Bridge Alzheimer's care unit at the Homewood Residence in Delray Beach have allowed residents to adopt a large black stray cat from an animal rescue group (20). Another alternative is to designate an area or room where "resident pets" will live and can be used as a play area for seniors to overcome depression/loneliness.

Pros and Cons of Housing Animals in Residential Facilities

However, there are advantages and disadvantages that one has to weigh before considering allowing animals to be housed in senior care facilities. The disadvantages of housing an animal in a facility would be that it would be difficult to maintain the hygiene of the animal to meet health regulations of the facility. Additionally, there would need to be a person solely dedicated to taking care of the animal and making sure that it is taking its medications, has enough exercise, and properly fed on a daily basis. The other disadvantage of housing an animal within a senior care facility is that many people may have allergies, which severely restricts the type or amount of animals that can be housed within. So it would be important to establishing regulations for allowing, or adopting hypoallergenic animals within the facility. Many facilities now have restrictions on pets because of health and wellness concerns of the residents within their facility. However, by requiring their residents to have up-to-date medical and vaccination records on file, the facility can determine if the animal is healthy enough for human interaction. If the animal does interfere with the health, safety, and rights of the people within the facility, then that animal would not be permitted to remain at the facility.

There are, however, many pros to housing animals within residential facilities as well. To reiterate, the interaction with animals has been shown to improve the health and well-being of elderly adults. By housing animals within the facility, it should not prove to be financially detriment to the living facility. The residents all pay to live within the facility, and improving ones health will not change the amount that they pay. If it does end up costing the facility more money, they can circumvent this deficit by increasing the cost of living by a nominal amount.

Another alternative is to schedule regular meetings or activities with therapy dogs and handlers to get some interaction with animals. Although it may prove to be beneficial on a short-term basis, it may be difficult to see lasting benefits. However, it is difficult for one to establish long-lasting emotional attachment to a therapy dog that you only see every once in a while. By allowing an animal to live within the facility, it is almost like another resident, friend, or even family member.

Overall, the pros outweigh the cons in allowing animals within living facilities. The main goal of a living facility is to maintain the health of the individuals living there. Although it may take some time to help to accommodate the animals and the residents, the improvement that they will see in their residents should be enough for the advantages to justify the disadvantages.

Community Action: Justifying the Costs of Providing Benefits for Seniors

There is still much that needs to be done to promote the adoption of animals through adoption centers and the regulation of pets being allowed to live in senior care facilities.

Local shelters may step up to the plate and help promote the adoption of senior pets by the elderly and by residential facilities that house the elderly. An important factor to consider is the cost of adoption. Perhaps shelters may consider providing some of their more senior pets to the elderly without charging an adoption fee. The shelters would benefit from this as well by increasing the volume of pets adopted, as increasing their presence in the community, and finding homes for senior pets that are less adoptable.

We have sent the letter below to the following animal shelters:

St. Huberts Adoption Center & Admin Offices
P.O. Box 159
575 Woodland Ave.
Madison, NJ 07940
info@sthuberts.org
(973) 377-2296

Mt. Pleasant Animal Shelter
194 Route 10 West
East Hanover, New Jersey 07936
info@njshelter.org
(973) 386-0590

Edison Animal Shelter
125 Municipal Boulevard
Edison, NJ 08820
(732) 287-0900

Randolph Regional Animal Shelter
97 Ironia Road
Mendham, NJ
friendsofrandolphanimalpound@gmail.com
(973) 543-9333

Friends of Somerset Regional Animal Shelter
100 Commons Way
Bridgewater, New Jersey 0880
(908) 725-0308

Letter to Shelters:

Hello _____,

I am writing to you to encourage you to consider waiving your adoption fee for senior citizens seeking to adopt a senior pet. I think that you'll come to realize that by doing so will benefit the shelter as well.

Many shelters waive or give discounts on many of the fees associated with adopting a dog or cat. They have also begun to provide senior citizens with the basic amenities required for the proper care of their newly adopted animals. These include providing leashes, collars, beds, microchips, spay/neutering, vaccinations, amongst other services.

Some facilities are beginning to offer a "Seniors for Seniors" program in which they adopt out senior dogs or cats, or companion animals that may otherwise be difficult to adopt out because of their age, to seniors at a markedly reduced price. Especially in shelter facilities that have limited space, a program such as this may increase the turnover of sheltered animals and adoption rates and decrease the number of animals that are euthanized, saving your shelter money.

One such shelter, the Butte Humane Society Animal Shelter reports that the average cost per animal handled within their facility is \$130 based on 6,029 animals, with each animal staying in the shelter for an average of 11 to 12 days. Around the country, the average cost per animal averages around \$150 to \$250 per animal for open door shelters and \$350 to \$450 for no-kill shelters. Many shelters, especially no-kill shelters hold their animals for as long as they can until they find them a loving home. This makes the cost of holding the animal increase everyday, with many dogs staying in the shelter for an indefinite amount of time before they are adopted. Other facilities that use euthanasia not only have to deal with the emotional ramifications of euthanizing an animal, but also the fees associated with putting an animal down. By helping an animal find a home quickly, the facility will greatly decrease its expenditures, as well as enable the animal to live out their life with their needs taken care of. By establishing programs for senior citizens with benefits to persuade them to adopt a pet from the shelter facility, the pets will be adopted out faster, and euthanasia may eventually become an unnecessary option.

We would like to help facilitate the adoption of pets by senior citizens as well as by residential facilities that house the elderly by connecting you with seniors and senior residences. Please reach out to us if you would like to make this happen.

Sincerely,

Matt Long
Rutgers University Student majoring in Animal Sciences

Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Rutgers University

More research is needed on the physiological and behavioral effects that animals have on humans. Studies on the effects of companion animals, specifically on the elderly, is especially important because seniors generally have more needs, both emotionally and medically, than the general population. It would be expected that seniors would experience an improvement in their health and well-being and this would translate into lower health care costs and a longer, more fulfilling life. If research clearly demonstrated that companion animals had a positive effect on the health and well-being of seniors and seniors residing in residential facilities, then that may drive policy change for animals being allowed in senior centers.

The most effective way to address this issue is to communicate directly with senior centers and senior care facilities. We have sent the letter below to the following senior care facilities:

Merry Heart Health Care Center
200 Route 10 West at Hillside Avenue
Succasunna, NJ 07876
info@merryheart.com
(973) 584-4000

Mt. Arlington Senior Living
2 Hillside Drive
Mt. Arlington, NJ 07856
(973) 601-0988

Sunrise of Randolph
648 Route 10 West
Randolph, NJ 07869
(973) 328-1922

The Chelsea of Montville
165 Changebridge Rd.
Montville, NJ 07045
(973) 402-1100

Regency Grande Nursing and Rehabilitation Center
65 North Sussex Street
Dover, NJ 07801
(973) 361-5200

Senior Care Facilities:

Hello _____,

It has come to our attention that your facility currently does not have a resident companion animal or allow for your residents to own companion animals. By allowing animals to live within

your facility may be beneficial not only for your residents, but also may be beneficial for your facility as well. You may find that by having companion animals, you may attract more residents and achieve greater community presence.

Research has shown that people receive health benefits just by interacting with animals. Hormones are released into the body that help to lower blood pressure, heart rate, stress levels, and help to alleviate symptoms of depression and loneliness. Interacting with an animal periodically, as might occur if you had one resident companion animal, is likely to be beneficial for the residents as well.

By allowing your residents to have their own animals, or by even adopting a resident pet, we believe that you will only further demonstrate the quality of your care and the lengths you are willing to go to provide the best care possible. We would like to help facilitate this by connecting you with an animal shelter that would consider giving you a companion animal without having to pay adoption fees. Please reach out to us if you would like to make this happen.

Sincerely,

Matt Long
Animal Science student at Rutgers University

Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Rutgers University

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Letter to the Editor

Matt Long's Letter to the Editor – Sent to *Star Ledger* 7/29/15

Please consider publishing my letter to the editor - I truly believe that it is important for people to understand the implications that the human-animal bond has on improving the health of older adults. By informing the public about this form of alternative therapy, I believe that there is a chance that living facilities will be more lenient with allowing animals to live within their facilities. Additionally, by giving older adults more benefits when adopting animals in order to cut down the cost of animal adoptions, I believe it will be beneficial for not only the adopter, but also for the facilities that they are adopting the animals from. Sharing this letter may finally shed more light on these issues and encourage policies and research to be undertaken to begin using animals as an alternative form of therapy and to increase the rate of adoptions! If you have any concerns or questions, I encourage you to contact me!

To the Editor:

I am writing to you to help shed some light on the human-animal bond. The animals that we consider to be our friends, companions, and even family have an even greater impact on our health than we know. Research has shown that just fifteen minutes of interaction with an animal can stimulate hormone release, increasing levels of cortisol and serotonin in the body. These hormones are useful for lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and stress levels. By interacting with an animal over a long period of time, a person could see a steady decrease in cholesterol levels, depression, and may even be protected against heart disease and stroke. All of this comes without a pill, a needle, or a therapist. We are a long way from having animals prescribed by a doctor, but there are some things that we can do now to make use of this alternative form of therapy.

The demographic that is most in need of this form of therapy is the older adult population. Many older adults are missing the social interaction that they require. The adults that live by themselves are constantly in isolation, and are prone to suffering depression and stress-related illnesses. However, this can be fixed by promoting animal adoption within this population. These animals provide the companionship and love that these people need, and the people can reciprocate the same long and companionship back to these animals that are lacking the loving home and affection that they need as well.

However, many of these adults are hesitant about taking on these responsibilities because of their financial situation, physical or mental disabilities, as well as their living situation. The best way to fix this is to make adoption more appealing to them. By offering benefits and discounts to older adults looking to adopt pets, I believe that they will be more inclined to adopt these pets into the loving homes that they deserve. Additionally, the shelters they are adopting for will benefit because it will increase rates of adoption, cutting down the costs it takes to provide for them within the shelter, or even euthanize them.

The other way to fix this situation is to encourage living facilities to be more lenient with allowing their residents to bring pets in to live with them. Many senior care facilities have

strict regulations that prohibit ownership of animals because of health and safety regulations, as well as their inability to regulate and care for the animals properly. However, many senior care centers have begun to be more tolerant with their policies against pet ownership, and have even begun to adopt programs to care for them. Some facilities have even gone so far as to hire a professional for the sole purpose of taking care of the pets that live within their facilities. Other facilities have even adopted a “house pet” from rescue groups that lives within the facility that all of the residents share!

Although there have already been many steps from living facilities and shelters to benefit and accommodate seniors looking to adopt pets, I believe now is the best time to shed more light and research onto this so that more facilities begin to adopt similar programs! With the health and well-being of the pets and senior citizens in mind, I truly believe that effect that the human-animal bond has human health is something that needs to be extensively researched. By enacting policies and engaging in more research on the topic, I believe that senior citizens and sheltered animals will mutually benefit!

Matt Long
Animal Science student at Rutgers University