

Doggone Good Medicine

Therapy animals spread comfort and healing in hospitals and beyond

By Jen Reeder



Photo: Terri Watson

Therapy dog Munchkin from Freedom Service Dogs

WHEN LINDA TIEMAN FIRST LEARNED about therapy dogs who visit patients in hospitals to “bring smiles,” she thought it would be a fun thing to do in retirement with her golden retriever, Dillon. But their experiences during the past 12 years volunteering with the nonprofit Denver Pet Partners have proved to be even more meaningful. In a particularly memorable encounter at a hospital, a woman ran into the hallway to ask if the dog could visit her young daughter, who had been in a coma for about three months—and loved dogs. The mother started petting Dillon with her daughter’s hand.

What happened next was extraordinary.

“The girl—who was in a deep coma—opened her eyes, smiled and started moving her hand to pet him,” Tieman recalled. “Her parents broke into tears. I will never forget

that breakthrough moment and how grateful they were Sometimes animals can do things that people just can’t do.”

Tieman is one of many Coloradans who volunteer with a therapy animal as a special way to give back to their local community. While service animals are trained to assist their handlers (such as a guide dog for a person who is blind), therapy animals help strangers.

Dogs are the most common species of therapy animal, but the national

nonprofit Pet Partners (the parent organization of Denver Pet Partners) also registers cats, horses, donkeys, ponies, rabbits, guinea pigs, domestic rats, birds, pigs, llamas and alpacas.

Laura Ackerman, director of marketing and communications for Denver Pet Partners, said there are about 130 therapy animal teams who visit hospitals as well as senior residences, memory care facilities, programs for at-risk youth, pretrial counseling sessions with court witnesses, reading programs for



Mike and Linda Tieman with Dillon and Darby from Denver Pet Partners



Photo: Patty Howe

Mike and his professional therapy dog Bagel who graduated from Freedom Service Dogs in 2016

kids (a miniature horse named Duke is particularly popular), universities during finals week and special events.

"The effect on people is amazing," she said.

Research has shown numerous benefits of interacting with animals, from lowering blood pressure to decreasing symptoms for veterans with PTSD and boosting sociability in children with autism.

"Oxytocin, which is the hormone that's released in women when they bond with their babies, is actually released in your body if you're looking into the eyes of a dog and having a positive reaction," Ackerman said. "There are a lot of studies going on now, and it's interesting to see things being proven that we just know anecdotally."

Many nonprofit organizations offer animal-assisted interventions in metro Denver (and throughout the



Photo: Linda Chassman Craddock

Wally the goat from Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado

THERAPY PET PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH

A variety of programs throughout the Denver Metro area and across the state offer pets to help people in need. Research is also being done.

Alliance of Therapy Dogs
therapydogs.com

Barking C.A.A.T. Ranch
7275 Kipling St.
Arvada, CO 80005
720-266-4444
animalassistedtherapy-
programs.org

Denver International Airport's Canine Airport Therapy Squad
8500 Peña Blvd.
Denver, CO 80249
flydenver.com/cats

Denver Pet Partners
P.O. Box 271505
Littleton, CO 80127
720-556-3434
denverpetpartners.org

Freedom Service Dogs
7193 S. Dillon Ct.
Englewood, CO 80112
303-922-6231
freedom servicedogs.org

Human Animal Bond Research Institute
Shares research about therapy animals
habri.org

Pet Partners
10325 W. Poncha Pass
Littleton, CO 80127
720-556-3434
petpartners.org

Prescription Pet Program at Children's Hospital Colorado
Numerous locations—call volunteer office for information:
720-777-6887
childrenscolorado.org

Therapy Dogs International
tdi-dog.org



Photo: Terri Watson

Wonton is a therapy dog graduate from Freedom Service Dogs



Photo: Linda Chassman Craddock

Mini horse Misty helps clients through Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado

state). For instance, Therapy Dogs International has teams that visit Ronald McDonald House Denver, The Anchor Center for Blind Children, Colorado State Veterans Home of Fitzsimons in Arvada, elementary schools and other institutions.

For more than 30 years, Children's Hospital Colorado has offered an in-house therapy dog program called the Prescription Pet Program, in which carefully vetted dogs and handlers visit children with cancer and other patients with a doctor's "prescription"—the first program of its kind in the nation.

Denver International Airport has another distinctive therapy animal program: Canine Airport Therapy Squad. The program started in 2015 with 28 animals and has since grown to 124 dogs and, yes, one cat. Dogs are registered with the nonprofit Alliance of Therapy Dogs and circulate in terminals wearing "Pet Me" vests to ease stress of frazzled travelers. Their handlers give away trading cards with their pet's photo and stats like "Favorite Treat."

"We are excited to currently have the largest airport pet therapy program in the country," said Lisa Dittberner, manager of volunteer programs. "We encourage airport guests to take a quick break from the hustle and bustle of the airport to hug them, pet them and take a picture with them."

Denver is also home to professional therapy animals that assist therapists, social workers, school counselors and other mental health professionals. A prime example is Barking C.A.A.T. Ranch in Arvada, run by the nonprofit Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado.

Linda Chassman, a therapist and educator, co-founded the organization in 2010 after witnessing the positive effect that her cat Norman had on patients when she was in private practice. Now the ranch offers animal-assisted psychotherapy with more than 30 animals, includ-

ing horses, donkeys, alpacas, goats, dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs and rats (named "Peanut" and "Butter" by clients).

A domestic violence survivor working to find her voice might learn to assert herself by leading a horse, or clients might start a conversation about substance abuse after watching a canine "fetch addict" relentlessly chase a ball. All the animals are rescues, which cultivates empathy, Chassman said.

"For what we do, the animal story is really important," she explained. "If we've had an animal that's been abandoned or neglected, then the client feels for the animal and then they feel like they're helping the animal, too."

Freedom Service Dogs is an Englewood-based nonprofit that rescues dogs and trains them as service animals for veterans with PTSD and people with disabilities (for free). If a dog is disqualified from working as a service dog—for instance, if he startles at loud noises—he can be retrained as a therapy dog for professionals like Chassman, who got her dog Rupert from the organization.

Erin Conley, director of communications for Freedom Service Dogs, said graduates have gone on to assist many therapists, including those who work with elderly veterans and children who are victims of sexual abuse. Some rescued dogs have clearly had rough starts, but she said with positive reinforcement training, "You really see them come out of their shells and start to shine."

"We try to help them fulfill their purpose," she said. "These therapy dogs get to touch many, many lives."

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is immediate past president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Her work has appeared in Family Circle, BBC News, Modern Dog and many other publications. She wrote about her experiences volunteering at a Durango hospital with her therapy dog, Rio, in the anthology "Second-Chance Dogs."

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