



# WisconsinRisk

A Quarterly Publication of the State of Wisconsin  
Injured Patients & Families Compensation Fund

## The Power of Pet Therapy The Therapeutic, Risk Management, and Financial Impact

By  
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"I am not going to wash my face for a month" clearly said through a deep belly laugh by a resident at Alden Meadow Park Rehabilitation and Health Care Center in Clinton, Wisconsin. The impact of this resident's comment is amplified exponentially when you know he was suffering from advance dementia, had not spoken or laughed for nearly a month. The impact's reach goes even further: the family began bringing in their dog to visit with this resident, the facility began receiving multiple requests for pet therapy from residents and family, and the facility instituted a pet therapy program.

The National Institute of Mental Health recognizes pet therapy as a valid and valuable form of psychotherapy. The positive impact of pet therapy on emotional well being and quality of life has been studied for over 40 years. Pet therapy's therapeutic positive impact is well documented in respected allopathic and alternative health care journals. One clinical journal states that "Working with animals, such as horses, dogs, or cats, may help some people cope with trauma, develop empathy, and encourage better communication. Companion animals are sometimes introduced in hospitals, psychiatric wards, nursing homes, and other places where they may bring comfort and have a mild therapeutic effect. Animal-assisted therapy has also been used as an added therapy for children with mental disorders. Research on the approach is limited, but a recent study found it to be moderately effective in easing behavioral problems and promoting emotional well-being.<sup>1</sup> Nursing home administrators have noted the benefits of a pet therapy program. Weekly visits inspire a new sense of purpose in their resident population, ease feelings of loneliness, and create a sense of companionship. Administrators have gone on to say "It truly is amazing to see a resident who is unable to verbalize emotions show excitement, bewilderment and joy thanks to 'pet therapy'certified therapy dogs."<sup>2</sup>

Risk Management policies and procedures should be in place and closely followed in order to avoid harm to humans, injury to the therapy dog, and liability claims. The following key elements are recommended for managing the risks associated with a pet therapy program.

1. Only allow certified therapy dogs to visit with residents and patients. Therapy Dogs International and Delta Society are two national pet therapy organizations that require both dogs and handlers to be certified, require submission of annual health records, and track the service hours of the dog-handler team
2. It is recommended that the dog and handler carry insurance that covers accidental injury or damages. Some of the certifying, therapy dog organizations provide this coverage to their member teams as a privilege of certification.
3. The health care facility should meet the dog and handler to confirm that the team is a good personality and culture match.
4. The dog-handler team should check-in with Administration or another designated individual before proceeding with the visit. There may be specific needs or changes in resident/patient (patient) health conditions that must be shared such as change in mobility, mental status, or infection control issues.
5. The dog should always be clean and well groomed.
6. The dog and handler should both wear identification.
7. The handler should be in full control of the dog at all times.
8. Proper hand-washing for both the patient and handler should take place before and after visiting each patient.
9. The handler should notify their contact person when the visit is over and they are leaving the facility.
10. The dog-handler team may become important members of the care team. If so, they may be invited to join in care plan meetings or therapy meetings depending on the frequency of visits, level of observation skills, and confidentiality concerns.

There are numerous studies that validate the claims that pet therapy can help to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, increase social interaction, assist with nutrition in Alzheimer patients and even serve as an adjunct therapy for pain management. There is very little, if anything, written about the financial impact of a pet therapy program to a health care organization's bottom line; however, there is no doubt that the joy, comfort and peace that the pets and handlers bring to patients is priceless.

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## About WiscRisk

WiscRisk is published quarterly and circulated to more than 14,000 healthcare providers statewide. Designed to keep readers informed of trends in liability claims and loss prevention, this publication is prepared by the Risk Management Steering Committee for the Injured Patients & Families Compensation Fund.

Articles published in WiscRisk contain the expressed opinions and experiences of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the Injured Patients and Families Compensation Fund. Authors are required to make disclosure of any relevant financial relations, which may be related to the subject matter discussed. Authors have made proper disclosure and have no relevant financial relationships that exist now or in the past 12 months.

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**Policy/Procedure provided by  
St. Joseph's Hospital - Marshfield**

**Pet Therapy—Done By Volunteer**

**Purpose Statement:**

- To provide safe and sanitary pet therapy for patients by a trained volunteer on the Mental Health, Palliative Care, Pediatric and Rehabilitation Units, as well as to protect other patients, visitors and staff. (Other units desiring pet therapy should contact Volunteer Services.)
- To provide emotional support and comfort to patients by providing therapeutic interaction for patients with pets in an effort to normalize the environment and help reduce the stress of hospitalization. In addition, this may enhance positive, physical, cognitive, emotional and social interactions.

**Procedure:**

- A. Volunteer pet therapy visits will be scheduled by the Volunteer Services Director on a regular basis after the following criteria has been met:
1. Patient care unit manager or his/her designee agrees to coordinate pet therapy program on the unit, including receiving permission from the patient's physician prior to the pet therapy visit.
  2. An adult (minimum of 18 years old) Saint Joseph's Hospital trained volunteer will escort the pet for the duration of the visit.
    - a. Volunteer training, coordinated by Volunteer Services Director, will include: Hospital mission and values; HIPAA regulations; photo I.D.; infection control issues; room signage; standard precautions; recording hours; background check; dress code; parking; confidentiality; safety; and unit-specific orientation.
  3. Volunteer has completed a health assessment and has been cleared by Employee Health Department.
  4. Volunteers will wear assigned uniform and photo I.D. badge while on unit.
  5. Pets must be clean and well-groomed, free from overt disease at the time of the scheduled visit and have an up-to-date vaccination history.
  6. Therapy "Pets" will include dogs and cats only.
- B. Once Volunteer has been trained, received unit-specific orientation, been cleared by Employee Health and the therapy pet's information is on file:
1. Pets must be caged or on a leash when going to the unit.
  2. Volunteer must accompany his/her pet(s) at all times, never leaving pet alone with patient.

3. Pets may only have contact with patients who have received physician consent.
  4. Pets may visit only if the patient is in a private room or semi-private room if roommate has pet visitation permission.
  5. Good hand-washing techniques must be followed after having contact with pets. Either soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub may be used.
  6. Any bites, scratches or other injuries must be thoroughly cleansed with soap and water immediately. In the event an injury should occur, report to unit designee and Volunteer Services and complete an incident report.
  7. Therapy pets:
    - a. Dogs:
      - Must be Therapy Dog International (TDI) or Delta certified. A copy of certification must be presented at the time of Volunteer Service's interview/orientation and placed on file.
      - A copy of the "Canine Examination/Evaluation" and the annual "Canine and Feline Vaccination/Fecal Record" will be kept in Volunteer Services. (See attachments #1 and #3.)
    - b. Cats:
      - A copy of the "Feline Examination/Evaluation" and the annual "Canine and Feline Vaccination/Fecal Record" will be kept in Volunteer Services. (See attachments #2 and #3.)
- C. Restrictions:
1. Pets WILL NOT be allowed to visit patients who:
    - a. Are in isolation for infectious diseases or immunosuppressive reasons;
    - b. Have not been granted permission through a physician's order.
  2. Pet therapy will be scheduled and pre-arranged by the patient care unit manager or his/her designee.
  3. Pets will be restricted from the following areas:
    - a. Kitchen and food preparation areas
    - b. Clean Utility room
    - c. Medication room
    - d. Nurses' Station
    - e. Tub/Shower room
    - f. Storage areas
    - g. Every effort will be made to limit pets to non-carpeted areas.
- D. Hospital Entry:
1. For liability and safety reasons, volunteers must sign-in and out in Volunteer Services, staying on first floor until they get to the approved elevator.

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and quality of life has been studied for over 40 years.*

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  3. Volunteer has completed a health assessment and has been cleared by Employee Health Department.
  4. Volunteers will wear assigned uniform and photo I.D. badge while on unit.
  5. Pets must be clean and well-groomed, free from overt disease at the time of the scheduled visit and have an up-to-date vaccination history.
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  - g. Every effort will be made to limit pets to non-carpeted areas.

**D. Hospital Entry:**

1. For liability and safety reasons, volunteers must sign-in and out in Volunteer Services, staying on first floor until they get to the approved elevator.
2. Pets will be brought to the unit via the following elevators:
  - a. Pediatrics: West Building to 3rd floor, using elevator #18;
  - b. Mental Health – West Building to 4th floor, using elevator #18;
  - c. Rehab-West Building to 5th floor, using elevator #18; and;
  - d. Palliative Care: South Building to 3rd floor, using elevator #24.
3. After signing in, Volunteer must report directly to the unit-specific designated area, avoiding contact with staff, patients and visitors.

**Pediatric Department**

- Child Life Specialists will coordinate volunteer staffed pet therapy visits on the unit.

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<sup>1</sup> Nimer J, Lundahl B. Animal-assisted therapy: a meta-analysis. *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People and Animals*. 2007 Sept; 20(3): 225-238.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Moen, Administrator, Alden Meadow Park