

## **Independent Living Skills workshop: Pet Therapy**

Thursday December 18<sup>th</sup> 2014

Guest Speaker:

Terry Power - Program Coordinator (St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs)

The mandate of St. John Ambulance has always been to provide care and comfort to the community. Their Therapy Dog Program started in Peterborough in the early 1990s, when the value of pet therapy was beginning to be recognized. Now, the program provides social interaction to a wide range of people, including the sick, elderly, people with mental health issues, and children.

What is the difference between a service dog and a therapy dog?

Service dogs are specially trained to support people in some specific way.

Therapy dogs simply interact socially with people.

The London branch of this program has 90 dogs in total. They range in size from 2.5 lbs to 200 lbs, but the majority of the volunteer dogs are medium to large in size. There are number of different breeds involved in the program, but the most common breed in the program the golden retriever (24/90). Terry explained that there is not necessarily a particular breed that is best for the program, but the individual disposition of each dog that determines whether or not they will make a good therapy dog. She also stressed that obedience training does not automatically mean the dog will be a good therapy dog. In order to be a good therapy team, both the handler and the dog must show interest in interacting socially with the people they will be visiting.

When new people express an interest in getting involved, the program assumes that the dog is ready and does not provide any training. Obedience training is not a requirement of the program; the only stipulation is that the handler must be in control over the dog and its behavior. Before beginning visits the dog and handler complete an orientation about the program. Then the dogs are evaluated with their handlers in situations that would be similar to what could possibly happen on their volunteer visits (eg. people using wheelchairs/walkers/canes, people touching the dogs all over, interacting with others dogs, loud/strange noises etc.). If the dogs show any sign of aggression they are failed and are never retested for the program. Dogs may fail if they are too excited or their owners do not have the

required control over them, but these dogs can be retested later. Once the dogs and handlers have passed the evaluation they are matched with a location to visit that is both appropriate, and hopefully, convenient for them to get to.

On their visits, the dogs must always remain on their leash and the leash is always held by the handler they were tested with. These rules exist for safety and liability reasons. The dogs also wear a uniform, which they recognize as a signal that it is time to work. Terry said that there is a change in the dogs disposition and behavior when they put on the uniform.

Once the team has established themselves in the program, they can be “child tested”. This process is similar to the initial testing, but involves children and some different behaviours that the dogs would be exposed to when visiting these types of facilities. If they pass, the team is then cleared to visit children under 12 years old. Children under 12 can be visited by a dog who has not been child tested only if their parent/guardian is present throughout the whole visit.

Terry stressed that it is important for the handler to watch for signals from their dog when they are visiting people. Things like seeking an exit, having tail and ears down, or lack of interest may indicate that the dog has had enough. Watching for these signals, and doing what they tell you, is important because it keeps the dogs from misbehaving if they become stressed or over tired, and helps to keep them from not wanting to come back (like preventing burnout).

Therapy Dogs visit a variety of places within London.

- Group homes
- Youth detention centre
- Retirement residences
- Nursing homes
- Hospitals
- And more...

When visiting these types of facilities, the team normally wanders around and visits with any of the people who are interested in the dog. But some facilities have a list of certain people to see. At one hospital the teams visit, a therapist joins the team and sets out specific goals to be accomplished by the patient during the visit with the dog.

The Therapy Dog program does a few home visits in certain circumstances. The services may be offered through another agency, which first must ensure that the home the dogs will visit is a safe place for them and the client to interact.

Some of the benefits seen with this program:

- It gives people something to look forward to.

- People who are very agitated are calmed by the animals presence.

- People talk to the dogs, sometimes even if they would not communicate with other people.

- Decreases in blood pressure.

- Overall improvements in well-being.

However, the program does face some challenges. They have had to stop visiting certain places because the environment was not safe for the dogs or the clients. For example, a nursing home where non-therapy dogs are allowed to run off the leash may create problems for the therapy dogs because they must stay on their leash during their visits. Another example is a group home setting where behavior of the residents may not be safe for the dogs.

In the case of an incident, the handler must have control of the dog and the team will be monitored to make sure it was a single event. If there is another incident or the team is not following the rules laid out by the St. John Ambulance, then they will be removed from the program.