

Animal-Assisted Therapy on a Special Treatment Program

Cindy Reyes, OTR/L, BCMH; Emily Morton, OTS
March 7, 2020

Summary

Over the course of 12 weeks, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) was implemented on a special treatment program. The primary populations served were people with schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and other severe and persistent mental health conditions. Therapeutic activities surrounding Tucker, the therapy dog, focused on social skills, life skills, stress management and other meaningful activities. The impact of having a therapy dog on the unit was measured through observation, a three-question survey, and unstructured interview with the residents.



Life Skills Related to AAT

- Social engagement with peers and staff
- Reduction of depression levels (Riccardelli et al. 2017)
- Mindfulness and stress management
- Encouraged participation in therapeutic activity
- Increased confidence
- Overcoming fears
- Saying goodbye and coping with loss

Key Terms

- *Animal assisted therapy*- “Animal-assisted therapy is a therapeutic intervention that incorporates animals, such as horses, dogs, cats, pigs, and birds, into the treatment plan. It is used to enhance and complement the benefits of traditional therapy” (Psychology Today)
- *Service Dog*- “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities” (Guide to California Service Dog Law, 2020)

- *Special Treatment Program*- “serve patients who have a chronic psychiatric impairment and whose adaptive functioning is moderately impaired. Special treatment program services are those therapeutic services, including prevocational preparation and prerelease planning, provided to mentally disordered persons having special needs in one or more of the following general areas: self-help skills, behavior adjustment, interpersonal relationships” (Barclays California Code of Regulations Title 22 Section 72443 and 72445)
- *Therapy Dog*- “dog trained to provide affection and comfort to people in hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, schools, people with learning difficulties, and stressful situations, such as disaster areas” (Weiss, 2019)

References

- Chu, C.-I., Liu, C.-Y., Sun, C.-T., & Lin, J. (2009). The Effect of Animal-Assisted Activity on Inpatients with Schizophrenia. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, 47(12), 42–48. doi: 10.3928/02793695-20091103-96
- Nathans-Barel, I., Feldman, P., Berger, B., Modai, I., & Silver, H. (2004). Animal-Assisted Therapy Ameliorates Anhedonia in Schizophrenia Patients. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 74(1), 31–35. doi: 10.1159/000082024
- Nepps, P., Stewart, C. N., & Bruckno, S. R. (2014). Animal-Assisted Activity: Effects of a Complementary Intervention Program on Psychological and Physiological Variables. *Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine*, 19(3), 211–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156587214533570>
- O'Haire, M. E., & Rodriguez, K. E. (2018). Preliminary efficacy of service dogs as a complementary treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder in military members and veterans. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 86(2), 179–188.
- Riccardelli, M., Henner, K., & Mcdade, K. (2017). Effects of Dogs on Depression Levels of Cancer Patients. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(4_Supplement_1). doi: 10.5014/ajot.2017.71s1-po5053
- Weiss, T. C. (2019, January 12). What is a Therapy Dog. Retrieved from <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/serviceanimals/therapy-dogs.php>
- Winkle, M., & Ni, K. (2019, January 22). Animal-Assisted Intervention 101. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/otp/Archive/2019/animal-assisted.aspx>.
- Zimolog, U., & Krupa, T. (2009). Pet ownership as a meaningful community occupation for people with serious mental illness. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63, 126–137.
- Barclays California Code of Regulations Title 22 Section 72443 and 72445 Special Treatment Program Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA. (2015, July). Retrieved from https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/service_animal_qa.html
- GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA SERVICE DOG LAWS. (2020). Retrieved February 17, 2020, from <https://superdog.com/service-dog-law/>

