

Caring Canines
Towards a Model of Canine Residency in Long-term Care
Northwood Care
and
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Caring Canines was a partnership project with Northwood Care, undertaken to explore the prospects and challenges of increasing the presence of dogs in continuing care. The project began as a preliminary study with CLARI funding which led to a SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant that extended the project from one to three “resident” dogs over a one-year time period and with additional research assistants. What follows is a brief report of the larger project made possible by the support of CLARI.

Project Goals

The project was built on the burgeoning literature on the role of dogs in seniors’ lives along a continuum from fully independent living to increased levels of continuing care, and informed by the broad and long-term commitment of Northwood to explore possible models of canine residency to enhance resident wellness and quality of life.

The goals of the study were to explore the role, meaning, impact, issues and challenges of dog residency across the continuum of continuing care and to develop model options for canine residency across this continuum. The primary questions guiding the research were: What happens when a dog becomes a “resident” in a continuing care facility? and What would it take for dogs to have a stronger presence in a continuing care facility?

How the Research was Conducted

The research was a collaborative, participatory study conducted using a qualitative approach. Over a ten-month period, for several days a week at various times of the day, three dogs took up residence in three different units/houses of Northwood’s two campuses. The units differed in level of resident care required from total dependence on assistance to greater levels of independence but with some care required. The dogs, ranging in size and breed, participated in the everyday life and routines of the unit, engaging naturally with residents, staff, and visitors and otherwise just being “at home.”

A research team, made up of the PI (Ardra) and three research assistants, followed the dogs and documented the nature, extent, and pattern of the dog-human interactions, including overt and nuanced responses to each dog’s presence through observations, informal conversations, and photographs. Shortly after the project began, it became clear that the dogs’ presence in the facility was having a significant and positive impact on the quality of life of the residents and on the quality of staff members’ work life. The observed impact was more nuanced than measurable; often noted in fleeting moments not easily captured in words. Enter Susan, an artist, who joined the project part-way through. Susan accompanied Ardra on many visits to the facility and, using sketch pad and pens, captured moments of connection between dog and human—subtle yet poignant depictions that, in a phenomenological sense, capture the everydayness of life by making the ordinary extraordinary.



Bella (now deceased) was an 11-year old Rough Collie who lived with her senior companion in an apartment not connected with Northwood.



Shilo is an 11-year old Puggle (Beagle-Pug cross) who lives with an elderly woman in a house also not connected with Northwood. Bella's and Shilo's companions receive dog walking assistance from a local charity, ElderDog Canada. The dogs were selected for the project both because they are so very different from one another in size and disposition and because they are both enamoured by being with people, a quality confirmed with their temperament test prior to their involvement. Bella and Shilo spent time at the Bedford campus.



Itsy is a six-year old Maltese-Yorkie mix. Her companion, Maria, is a Licensed Practical Nurse who works with residents who have dementia at Northwood's downtown campus. Six years ago, Maria occasionally took puppy Itsy to work in her pocket to show her to the residents. The response to Itsy was overwhelmingly positive and residents soon began to look for Itsy whenever Maria arrived at work. Before long, Itsy joined the unit as a "resident" canine, travelling to work with Maria every shift.

Findings

Overall, the success and significance of this project cannot be overstated. The main overarching theme identified was the role that dogs play in creating "home" in continuing care and how that sense of home is tied to quality of life for residents and workplace quality for staff. Other associated themes identified for residents include the role of dogs in providing companionship and comfort, serving as confidantes and ambassadors of joy, helping to create a sense of agency and independence, as well as facilitating social connections and expressions of identity. For staff, the dogs helped with care support on many levels and provided an enhanced quality of worklife. For family members and visitors, the dogs provided comfort and pleasure and assisted with communication and care of loved ones.

A number of challenges and complexities also were identified and need to be taken into account if next steps are to be taken to move the project forward to a next level or phase. Some of the complexities and challenges include: dog care responsibility, wellness, and safety; issues of attachment and “ownership;” adherence to health and safety boundaries and institutional regulations; sensitivity to cultural differences; and the need for education about dog care and the human-animal bond.

Collaboration and Communication

The project was designed and carried out in collaboration with Northwood and received a welcome response from residents, staff, and visitors alike. This was due in large part to the ways in which the project was internally communicated as well as to the participatory approach taken, which created a strong sense of commitment and involvement of staff and residents. At the end of the project, an open house was held at the Bedford campus and staff, residents, and family were invited to see a display of the artist’s drawings and offer comments about the project. The original drawings also were left on campus for distribution and subsequent use. Photo albums containing photographs taken throughout the project were created for the units/houses involved in the study.

The project also captured media attention. Towards the end of the study, CBC news spent the better part of a day at the Bedford campus filming Bella and Shilo “at home” and interviewing residents, staff, and family members. The resulting story was aired on CBC TV News and CBC radio, and published online. A presentation on the project was made at one international and three national conferences as well as at Northwood’s 2022 Research Symposium. A book chapter is in press with an international publishing company. Finally, in 2019 I was honoured to receive Northwood’s Live More Award for Distinction in Research for the project. All of this points to the significance and success of the research at local, regional, national, and international levels and, most important, for Northwood itself. As one staff member commented about the project, “If Northwood has done something right, this is it!”

Next Steps

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions, plans were underway to begin to address some of the challenges and complexities identified in the study by undertaking a next phase of the project that would involve partnership with ElderDog Canada and a canine co-residency model. Obviously, these plans were put on hold for an indefinite period of time; however, it is my hope that these plans can resume as soon as possible once restrictions are lifted, and be studied with the overall aim of moving further forward to achieving the goal of enhancing resident and staff quality of life and work through enhanced canine presence.