



March 2023

# ELDER CARE

## A Resource for Interprofessional Providers

### Animal-Assisted Interventions for Older Adults - Part 2

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Older adults live longer, healthier, and happier lives when they regularly interact with animals. Companion animals positively contribute to older adults' quality of life, mental health (reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment, and dementia) and physical health (increased physical activity, improved heart rate and blood pressure).

Animals yield social and emotional benefits by providing companionship, reducing loneliness, and helping older adults remain integrated in their communities. These benefits are not universal, as animals may represent utilitarian functions (food, work) or hold negative, symbolic associations. A culturally grounded approach and knowledge of an individual's past experiences with animals is important when considering animal-assisted interventions.

#### Challenges for Older Adults and Their Animals

Basic care for animals requires physical and cognitive ability and financial resources, and can therefore be challenging for some older adults. Walking a pet can be difficult due to neighborhood safety and accessibility, particularly during inclement weather. Assuring that animals receive appropriate care also requires an older adult to have transportation to veterinary services and financial resources to pay for spaying and neutering, vaccinations, routine examinations, follow-up, and emergency care. Older adults with limited financial resources and access to pet food may choose to feed their pet before themselves, putting themselves at risk for nutritional deficiencies. Clinicians can reduce barriers to care by accessing local resources (see Table 2).

#### The Role of Healthcare Professionals

Healthcare professionals should note pets and companion animals in their assessment and care planning. The presence of an animal at home can necessitate care arrangements to reduce barriers to seeking treatment for older adults who may require a temporary stay in a hospital, rehabilitation or skilled nursing facility, or other out-of-home care setting.

Older adults fleeing late life domestic violence also require temporary shelter for their pets, as pets are often threatened and abused by the perpetrator in an effort to control the victim of abuse. Some domestic violence shelters offer a safe haven to pets, or can identify temporary care for an older adult's pet.

Older adults who hoard should be evaluated for possible animal hoarding, as up to 40 percent of object hoarders also hoard animals. Animal hoarding presents a risk to involved animals and public health, and such incidents should prompt a 911 call to enlist involvement of local Humane Society, police, or animal control agencies.

When an older adult moves into a retirement, assisted living, or other residential facility either by choice or because they can no longer remain safely in their own home, it is important for healthcare professionals to anticipate and discuss the older adult's wishes and abilities regarding care of their pet animals. Health professionals can assist by conducting an interprofessional assessment of an individual's physical and cognitive ability to provide care for their animal, exploring resources that support the care of animals, and identifying facilities whose policies permit older adults to move in with their pets or support animal-assisted activity and therapy programs.

#### Federal Laws Supporting Animal-Assisted Interventions

Service animals support the ability of older adults living with a range of physical and psychiatric disabilities to participate in everyday activities. Older adults living with disabilities have a right to the use of service animals in a variety of public buildings and accommodations such as housing, stores, medical and benefits offices, shelters, and airports through protections afforded by the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Fair Housing Act, and the Air Carrier Access Act.

The Fair Housing Act supports the right to reasonable accommodations necessary to afford an individual with a

#### TIPS TO SUPPORT THE BENEFITS OF THE ANIMAL-HUMAN CONNECTION FOR OLDER ADULTS

- Community resources can support the ability of older adults to provide appropriate care for their animals and during care transitions. (Table 2)
- Consider the use of animals to improve health, behavioral health, social supports, and quality of life, and how older adults can benefit from contact with animals in an individualized context.
- A pet is an animal that does not qualify as a service or assistance animal, despite a letter from a health professional.
- Animal-Assisted Interventions can offer health and psychosocial benefits for older adults no longer able to care for a pet.
- Advance care planning with older adults should include planning for the care of a pet in the event of the individual's death or loss of cognitive function that results in placement in a facility that does not allow pets.

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disability an equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling, including the right to a service or support animal in “no pet” housing. Eligibility for reasonable accommodations was clarified by a [2020 guidance](#).

Requests for documentation to keep a pet in no-pet housing, gain access to transportation, or avoid pet fees can involve misconceptions and trigger difficult conversations. Health professionals should be prepared to explain the difference between a pet and a service or support animal and explain to patients that they are unable to write a letter when an animal does not meet the criteria (see Table 1).

## Bereavement, Death, and Relinquishment

Older adults often view their animals as family members. The loss of an animal through death, as a result of a move to a long-term care facility, or due to the inability to continue to provide appropriate care represents a major loss. Removing an animal during times of transition adds to the cumulative loss of one’s home and independence. This can be particularly stressful for people who have grown up with animals, as they have a greater emotional need for a companion animal. Pet bereavement support groups and services that assist in finding a new home for animals can offer support during these transitions (see Table 2).

## Policy Advocacy

Pet-friendly policies can prevent the additional loss of a pet

**Table 1. Terms and Definitions**

**Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI):** The use of various animal species in diverse manners beneficial to humans including therapy (AAT), education (AAE), and activities (AAA). See [AVMA Guidelines](#).

**Assistance Animal:** A service animal or support animal (per the FHA).

**Emotional Support Animal (ESA):** An animal that provides companionship and emotional support for individuals with psychological disorders. Not defined as service animals by ADA.

**Pet:** Animal that does not qualify as a service or assistance animal.

**Resident Animal:** Animals owned by a facility and cared for by staff, volunteers, and residents.

**Service Animal:** Working animals trained to assist people with a disability (defined by the ADA) with activities of daily living.

**Support Animal:** Assistance animals that do work, perform tasks, provide assistance, and/or therapeutic emotional support for individuals with disabilities. Differentiated from service animals.

and provide emotional support to residents by increasing social interaction and reducing isolation. Federal regulations do not address the use of pets or therapy animals in nursing homes, therefore states set their own policies. Residents and health professionals can partner with attorneys to advocate for expanded policies that support the rights of residents to keep their pets, service, or companion animals, and to have access to animal-assisted activities and therapy.

**Table 2. Resources Supporting Animal-Assisted Interventions with Older Adults**

**Pets for the Elderly Foundation** Helps pay fees to participating animal shelters throughout the United States for older adults who adopt a companion dog or cat; may include pre-adoption veterinary exams and spay/neuter fees. <http://www.petsfortheelderly.org/>

**Pet Partners** Registers and provides continuing education for handlers of multiple species and volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions including those serving older adults living with Alzheimer’s, experiencing crisis events, and approaching end of life. <https://petpartners.org/>

**Meals on Wheels Loves Pets** Provides grants and pet food donations through Meals on Wheels America to keep pets and their homebound older adults together. <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/changing-lives-one-snuggle-at-a-time>

**Pet Food Pantries** Look for a pantry in your area that is free-standing or associated with a food bank or animal welfare organization.

**Animal Licenses, Training Classes, Vaccinations, Spay and Neuter** Check with your local animal welfare organization for senior, disabled, and low income discounts. Review state or local laws, which may reduce or waive license fees for service and/or companion animals.

**Temporary Care for Pets** Check with local veterinarians, boarding kennels, and animal shelters.

**Domestic Violence & Temporary Shelter for Pets** The Safe Havens Mapping Project helps adults fleeing domestic violence seek safety for themselves and their animals. Contact your local domestic violence shelter, animal shelter, veterinarian, or boarding kennel to see if they can provide temporary pet care. <https://safehavensforpets.org/>

**Pet Bereavement Support Groups & Pet Cremation/Burial** The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement provides a roster of support groups across the United States. You can also check with local humane societies, grief support groups, and hospice programs for pet support group and pet cremation/burial options in your community. <http://www.aplb.org/support/>

**Animal Relinquishment** Check with your local animal welfare organizations, animal sanctuaries, and no-kill shelters.

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Supported by: Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, Arizona Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program and the University of Arizona Center on Aging

This project was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number U1QHP28721, Arizona Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.