

Other End of the Leash: The Volunteer Handlers Perspective of Animal-Assisted Interventions

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Abstract : Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAIs) have existed in various forms for centuries. In the past 30 years, there has been a dramatic increase in popularity. AAIs are now part of the lives of persons of all ages in many types of institutions. Anecdotal evidence of the benefits of AAIs have led to widespread adoption, yet there remains a lack of solid research base for support. The research question was, what are the lived experiences of AAI volunteer handlers are? An interpretive phenomenological methodology was used for this qualitative study. Data were collected from 1 - 2 hour-long semi-structured interviews and 1 observational field visit. All interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded for themes by the principal investigator. Participants must have been an active St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program volunteer for a least one year. In total, 14 volunteer handlers, along with some of their dogs, were included. The St. John Ambulance is a not for profit organization that provides training and community services to Canadians. The Therapy Dog Program is 1 of the 4 nationally recognized core community service programs. The program incorporates dogs in the otherwise traditional therapeutic intervention of friendly visitation with clients. The lack of formal objectives and goals, and a trained therapist defines the program as an Animal-Assisted Activity (AAA), which is a type of AAI. Since the animals incorporated are dogs, the program is specifically a Canine-Assisted Activity (CAA), which is a type of Canine-Assisted Intervention (CAI). Six themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) a win-win-win situation for all parties involved - volunteer handlers, clients, and the dogs, (b) being on the other end of the leash: functions of the role of volunteer handler, (c) the importance of socialization: from spreading smiles to creating meaningful connections, (d) the role of the dog: initiating interaction and providing comfort, (e) an opportunity to feel good and destress, and (f) altruism versus personal rewards. Other insights were found regarding the program, clients, and staff. Possible implications from this research include increased organizational recruitment and retention of volunteer handlers and as well as increased support for CAAs and other CAIs that incorporate teams of volunteer handlers and their dogs. This support could, in turn, add overall support for the acceptance and broad implementation of AAIs as an alternative and or complementary non-pharmaceutical therapeutic intervention.

Keywords : animal-assisted activity, animal-assisted intervention, canine-assisted activity, canine-assisted intervention, perspective, qualitative, volunteer handler

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