

Awarding Peace to Hospice Pet Owners

Avow's newest partnership with Pet Peace of Mind ensures that hospice patients' pets are cared for and nurtured during their stay and after they've passed on.

By Tess Raines

The end-of-life transition comes with a distinct set of challenges. There is fear of the unknown and the understanding that time with loved ones now comes with an expiration date. Between the heightened emotions and endless preparations for a peaceful hospice experience, it's easy to overlook the pet that's been at a patient's side all along.

Pet Peace of Mind, a national end-of-life pet care support network, helps bridge this gap in the hospice patient's experience. They've partnered with hospices across the nation, including Avow, to ensure that patients' pets can stay with their owners and still be taken care of amid the responsibilities of the final life transition. They've also established a rehoming process for the pet once a patient passes away.

The importance of keeping the patient and pet together during this

transition lies in the vast mental and emotional benefits for the patient. Dr. Lesli Reiff, a veterinarian at Naples Safari Animal Hospital and the consulting veterinarian for the new Pet Peace of Mind program at Avow, says that pets act as destressors in any situation. "They're a great comfort and they become part of the family," she explains. "Sometimes it's the only one you can talk to about things. They decrease anxiety and concern as people enter (hospice). The more we can keep them together, the better it is for all."

Pet Peace of Mind relies on volunteers who will perform everyday pet-related duties and errands for hospice patients, including walking the pet or taking them to the vet or groomer. This lifts a burden from the patient, who can be assured that their pets' needs are being met.

Although Avow is still rolling out

the program, Reiff is already at work training volunteers on how to manage the animals and pay attention to signs that a pet may need veterinary care.

The Pet Peace of Mind volunteer department will evaluate the various needs of each referral they receive, and will assign the appropriate volunteer with the task.

Christy Bork, the national program manager for Pet Peace of Mind, adds that "people who are employed as vet techs, groomers, doggy day care and shelter workers make excellent Pet Peace of Mind volunteers because they work with many types of animals and temperaments." Volunteers will be matched with a pet whose disposition and health history they are best qualified to handle.

Regularly seeing the same volunteer helps the pet to establish a trust and bond with its caretaker, Reiff



says. It also allows that volunteer to notice when there is a change in the animal's temperament. If this is the case, the volunteer can contact Reiff, who will step in to assess the situation and advise the volunteer on the best course of action.

Before a patient passes away, Avow's Pet Peace of Mind team will—with the owner's permission—upload the pet's information to an extensive online network to determine an eligible home for the animal. This feature of the program keeps pets out of the shelters and affords the owners a sense of peace to know that their pet won't be faced with an uncertain future after they're gone. For short-term place-

ment, Avow hopes to establish an internal foster system that can take in a patient's pet in the event of an emergency or other urgent need.

The program also offers specialized consultation for a patient's ill or elderly pet. "Honestly, when you're faced with trying to keep yourself going, and having a hard time of trying to take care of yourself and your loved one, it's hard to also make time to address the medical needs of the pet in the house too," Reiff says.

Judy LeDoux is a donor and longtime supporter of Avow's PAWS program—and devoted to her 10-pound Chihuahua, Stanley. After seeing how well her father was cared for during his time at Avow Hospice,

LeDoux began supporting the company's pet bereavement and visitation programs as a way to give back.

She recalls a friend who went through the bereavement program after his 19-year-old German Shepherd passed away. He was heartbroken, but later expressed to LeDoux how grateful he was that such a program existed. "He told me how wonderful it was, because without Avow, and without talking about it to somebody, he felt that he wouldn't have gotten over it," she says.

LeDoux is enthusiastic about Pet Peace of Mind and the happiness it will bring to pet owners who are in hospice. She's seen the value firsthand of bringing animals and



hospice patients together through the PAWS program. Dogs and cats —with and without hair—and even a donkey have wandered in at one time or another to lighten up the mood in the room. And the response was always guaranteed.

“Just the joy in their eyes— oh, it’s wonderful,” LeDoux says, referring to the moment an animal is brought into a patient’s room. “People respond to animals and when the animal responds to you, I think it’s worthy. I kind of walk out a little bit and wipe the tears.”

