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WEEKEND BREAK

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Katherine Lacaze/For The Daily Astorian
 Finn, a 6-year-old Golden Retriever who provides pet therapy through Providence Seaside Hospital's Angel on a Leash program, greets (from left) registrars Sarah Kisel, Kellie Walsh and Helen Moore during a visit to the hospital Aug. 30. He is accompanied by his volunteer handler, Shari Moynihan.

CANINE CAREGIVERS

'ANGELS ON A LEASH' THERAPY DOGS BRING SUPPORT TO PATIENTS AT NORTH COAST PROVIDENCE FACILITIES

By **KATHERINE LACAZE**
 For EO Media Group

When Finn, a 6-year-old Golden Retriever, begins his shift at Providence Seaside Hospital, sporting his leash and official badge, he has a single purpose: to soothe and support patients, their families and caregivers.

"He is just there to make you smile," his owner and handler, Shari Moynihan, said.

Finn has a particularly exuberant personality — "because he's so friendly and people-oriented," Moynihan explained — so he only visits humans in waiting rooms and around reception desks at the Providence Rehabilitation Services center in Gearhart and the hospital and clinics in Seaside.

Generally, though, Providence's Angel on a Leash therapy dogs can conduct visits in the main lobby, chapel, waiting rooms and designated patient rooms at all facilities, including the Providence ElderPlace, the Providence North Coast Clinic in Cannon Beach and the Providence Heart Clinic in Astoria.

"Basically, every place Providence is at on the North Coast has access to our pet therapy program," said Cherylyn Frei, the director of mission integration and spiritual care, who launched the program in Seaside in the fall of 2016.

Pet therapy on the coast

Frei and her husband, David, are pioneers in pet therapy, having worked in the field since they were volunteers at a Providence facility in Seattle in 1998.

"We immediately saw the magical and spiritual connection people have to their pets that helps facilitate the healing process," Frei said, adding that pets are "a bridge to communication."

The couple moved around during the past two decades. Within every hospital or clinic setting where Frei worked as a chaplain, she launched a new program, with her husband serving as the first volunteer along with their own dogs. They currently have an 8-year-old Brittany named Grace and a 10-year-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Angel, who is nearing the end of her tenure as an active therapy dog.

When the Freis moved to Seaside last year, they brought the program template, as well as the title, and integrated it into Providence's North Coast services. The hospital works with Pet Partners, a nonprofit therapy animal registry group, to coordinate its volunteer handlers and their dogs.

Angel on a Leash now has six active teams from the North Coast area, with two pending. Each team must include at least one handler and one dog, but other combinations — such as two handlers per dog or several dogs per handler — are possible.



Finn greets Dave Lene, of Warrenton, in a waiting room at the Seaside facility. The therapy dogs help strengthen and support the experience of patients and their families during their time in Providence facilities along the North Coast.

Before serving, potential volunteers and their dogs must complete Pet Partners' handler course and a team evaluation, undergo a professional screening, and perform an initial visit where they are shadowed by staff. Teams can take anywhere from one to six months to get registered.

To continue volunteering, teams must maintain current registration and be in good standing with Pet Partners. The program is also monitored by annual patient, family and caregiver satisfaction surveys.

'Bringer of hope'

Providence's mission is to "reveal God's love for all, especially the poor and vulnerable, through our compassionate service," and Frei perceives the dogs and their handlers as "the spokespeople" for that mission. Therapy dogs emphasize care of the whole person by affirming their emotional, spiritual and physical connection to animals and its interconnectedness to health and healing.

"A dog is a great conduit of God's love in our community," she said, adding each one is "a caregiver in their own right, a bringer of hope and wellness and joy."

Moynihan, who started volunteering with the program a few months ago because "you get to a certain age where you need to feel needed," confirmed the salubrious effect Finn has on people at the hospital and clinics who start opening up after having contact with him. The pair spends a majority of their time listening rather than talking.

"It does my heart good to see them so happy to see him," she said.

The right fit

While pet therapy is generally associated with patients and their loved ones, it is also helpful for caregivers, whose daily work can produce stress and tension, said Alana Kujala, the manager of community partnerships. Moynihan will look for opportunities to interact with staff while volunteering.

One of the program's main priorities is to ensure the dogs are enjoying themselves. Providing comfort and connection to humans in clinical settings requires abundant focus and control of their natural instincts. They must behave a certain way and know how to respond in the middle of a traumatic situation.

"The dynamic can change very quickly, because it's a hospital," Kujala said.

For that reason, most sessions last from half an hour to an hour, and handlers must be aware of their dog's stress signals.

"You want to keep it fun for them so they look forward to coming back," Frei said.

Certain dogs thrive in the pet therapy program because of their natural instinct and intuition. A breeder or owner often can tell after puppies are whelped which ones possess the personality to thrive as a therapeutic companion, Frei said. Training and help from the handler are only used to refine the dog's innate response.

Some teams will begin the training and registration process but not complete it when they realize the dog isn't the right fit. Pet Partners' registration process is intentionally rigorous; there are many health and safety issues to consider when conducting a pet therapy program in a hospital-like setting.

Patients can schedule visits from therapy dogs, and handlers can choose which days to volunteer. Sometimes they will walk around the facility and see if anyone would like the service, always asking permission before entering a space, Frei said.

"Patients should have a choice to reject a service," she said, adding "to be able to say 'no' is empowering."

Individuals with a passion for pet therapy need not have their own dog to volunteer with the Angel on a Leash program.

To learn more about volunteering with Angel on a Leash or any other Providence program, contact Volunteer Coordinator Mark Squire at 503-717-7249 or Mark.Squire@providence.org.