

New program trains dogs, owners for therapy work

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Argus Observer

Tuesday, October 5, 2010 11:01 AM PDT

Joanne Harrison holds registered pet therapy dog Brenna in a garden at XL Hospice in Payette. Harrison will be leading training sessions that will help others to register their pets so they can be used to brighten the day of patients at care facilities.

Payette — XL Hospice has recently started a program designed to help introduce people in hospice and other care facilities to a new breed of volunteer — ones of the furry and four-legged variety to be exact.

The program is a series of training and observation sessions that will allow volunteers to register their pets as therapy animals and then visit care facilities with them.

Joanne Harrison, who is the pet therapy coordinator for XL Hospice, said the program is open to anyone who wants to volunteer themselves and their animals to brighten someone's day.

Although the idea is not a new one, Harrison said she had seen a growing need in the local area and decided to become a registered tester observer for a company known as Therapy Dogs Inc., in December.

The company registers therapy dogs and backs the registration up with a \$5 million dollar insurance policy, which allows the animals access to many care facilities.

Harrison said the process of registering a pet is a fairly simple one, with the canines initially going through an assessment to see if the dog's personality is suited for being a therapy dog.

Harrison said the dog is monitored in a setting with people and other animals to see if the animal shows aggressive tendencies. She said she also monitors the handler at this time see their interaction with the animal.

If the animal and handler pass the assessment, Harrison said they then go on three observed visits to the type of facilities where the therapy dogs would be used, such as a hospice or another care facility.

If the animal and handler continue are suited for the work, Harrison said the handler finalizes a small amount of paper work, pays a \$25 yearly registration and then graduates and is ready to serve.

Harrison said she had been using a Sheltie named Brenna for the service, but the breed, with the exception of wolf or coyote mixes, or size of the animal is not important. She said it is the temperament and personality of the dog that matters.

Brenna shows her affinity for therapy dog work through a docile and loving attitude. She is quick to seek a physical connection with a human, and her striking blue eyes reveal a caring intellect.



Harrison said she has been using Brenna in visits to facilities for three years, and she has seen the dog make a meaningful difference to people in nursing homes, their own homes and other facilities.

Harrison said she remembers one woman in particular who had benefited from the visit by Brenna.

"I had one patient who was towards the end of her life," Harrison said. "A lot of times people quit speaking and communicating. They just start shutting down with no facial expression or anything."

"I walked in with the dog, and she got a huge smile and started talking and petting the dog. The caregiver there at the time could not believe the difference."

Harrison said the visit by the therapy dog also brightened the day of others at the facilities.

"You can also see the effect on family and visitors and staff at these facilities who are working with these people," she said. "It is a very stressful occupation, and just having the little break of seeing the dog is good for them, too."

Harrison said the experience of owning therapy dogs could be beneficial to the handler as well.

"The journey you go on, meeting the people you do, is wonderful," she said. "You can immediately see the effects these dogs have around patients."

Harrison said the point of the training and registration was to reach others with a caring experience from both the animal and the handler.

"We are looking for people to share their dog," she said. "That's pretty much what it's about. We are there for the patients. If they are on hospice, they have a six months or less diagnosis. A lot of them are very sick."

Harrison said the next training will begin with an informational meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday, but the assessment test will be on Oct. 16, and those who miss the meeting can still begin the process. For more information, contact Harrison at (208) 642-9222, or at joanne@xlhospice.com.