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New Four-Legged Volunteer Takes Different Approach to Pet Therapy

By Peter Balistrieri

Aurora

Posted: July 3, 2008

A new volunteer recently started working at the Aurora Behavioral Health Center in Waukesha and all he "asks" for in return for his services is the occasional head pat or belly rub.

Niko, a black lab mix, owned by Dr. Brenda Reed, licensed psychologist, has been providing love and nurturing for behavioral health patients for the past month.

Using dogs for physical therapy and visiting patients is fairly common, but it's a fairly new concept for behavioral health. Research shows that dogs have a physiological effect on people, reducing anxiety and blood pressure, as well as an emotional effect in the form of connection - dogs, in particular, give unconditional acceptance, and provide empathy and nurturing - this connection can be a powerful tool in helping people relay their feelings.

Dr. Reed brings Niko to most all of her therapy sessions, including her patients with sleep disorders at Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center. Niko's presence integrates relaxation into these sessions, and helps the patients calm down, both mentally and physically, which is critical to the therapy for sleep disorders.

"Many of my patients with sleep disorders have told me that having Niko there is one of the best things I could do to help them relax," said Reed.

Sometimes conversations with patients can become uncomfortable or difficult. According to Reed, patients have an easier time opening up with Niko in the room.

"I've actually seen patients reach out to pet Niko and talk to him. They feel safe talking to Niko, and know they can say anything and he won't pass judgment."

Using Niko has actually helped Reed's men become more expressive. In one particular example, Reed has seen more personality expressed from one of her male patients, while in the presence of Niko, than she has seen in several previous sessions.

Niko works wonders with the staff as well by getting them more engaged. "He opens the door to conversation," said Reed.

"I have met more physicians, therapists and other caregivers just walking down the hallways with Niko. Everyone stops to pet him and talk."

Patients who would definitely benefit from having Niko present in their therapy sessions are those experiencing anxiety, depression, loneliness or sadness, according to Dr. Reed. These people are more isolated and experience less physical touch, and Niko provides that missing piece. Also, for patients in their late teens or early twenties who don't really want to be in therapy, Niko can make them feel more comfortable with the situation.

"Actually, anyone who likes dogs will benefit. So far, I haven't found anyone who it wouldn't help."

Dr. Reed and Niko are at Aurora Behavioral Health Center in Waukesha or the Sleep Center at Aurora St. Luke's and can be reached at 262-896-6216.