

# A special companion

By **Natasha Egan** on October 6, 2016 in **Community Care Review**

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Dr Alicia Kennedy with client Peter Hill and dog EmmyLou. *Photo: Emma Malone.*

**While pets can provide a range of benefits to older people at home, owners sometimes struggle to care for them as their own needs increase, but help is available, reports Natasha Egan.**

Whether it's a dog, cat, bird, rabbit, or goldfish, a pet, in its various forms, colours and sizes, is family to many older people. Dr Alicia Kennedy, a veterinarian of 30 years with a particular interest in assisting older pet owners in her Geelong community, says seniors in particular are vulnerable when a partner dies and often their companion pet is their only friend in the house.

"I have lost count of how many times clients have said to me my pet is the reason I get out of bed in the morning and my reason for living," Kennedy tells *Community Care Review*.

Kennedy says while research is scant, particularly for community-dwelling seniors, it shows there are social and health benefits for older people with companion animals, with dogs in particular known to get people outdoors and interacting with other people.

“Companion pets encourage physical activity, so there are of course health benefits there. They encourage social interaction and provide companionship, which impacts on mental and emotional health and wellbeing,” she says

“There is a demonstrated benefit that people with pets generally recover faster from illness. Their hospital stays are not as extended; partly because they want to get themselves better and get home to their pets.”

These are also among the benefits highlighted in a report from the International Federation on Ageing, [\*Companion Animals and the Health of Older Persons\*](#), which provides a literature review of how pets contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

According to the report, while pets have been found to provide companionship and physical contact and reduce stress and bereavement for older people, owners sometimes struggle to meet their pet’s needs or access veterinary services.

Kennedy says she has witnessed this several times over the years. “The number one challenge for older people is physical mobility. They will be less able to walk their dog as often or as far as they have been used to or the dog needs. The onset of dementia can also impact the ability to care for their pet and feed them.”

The IFA report notes that with the growing momentum around the world to help older people live independently, volunteer and community support programs are subsequently being introduced to assist with the care of seniors’ pets.

Last year, Kennedy founded the Cherished Pets Foundation, which launched a community pet care project matching volunteer pet carers with older pet owners living independently in the community. She was in Paris in July for the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations conference where she was invited to present on the project.

The Cherished Pets Community Care project aims to respond to the changing needs of older pet owners to provide support for the health, wellbeing and management of the pet where it is needed, she says. “We want to keep people active and engaged for as long as possible.”

The project matches two volunteers per client and Kennedy’s veterinary practice provides the support to the pets. That includes a comprehensive health and wellbeing assessment, as well as a home pet care plan and an emergency care plan, which Kennedy says is an important part of the service.

“We discuss with the client the plan for the pet if the owner goes to hospital, transitions into long-term care or dies. We have those conversations so they have reassurance about the care of their pet.”

Kennedy says they recently added a respite care service where specifically recruited volunteers look after the pets in their own homes.

She says all the pet carer volunteers are trained to go into people’s homes and support pet care tasks, such as dog walking, grooming, bathing and helping with medications. The project also offers 24/7 volunteer support.

An internal evaluation of the pilot project, which included funding for 10 people, found participation alleviated worrying for pet owners around pet care and mutual benefits for clients and volunteers, says Kennedy.

Getting in-home pet support for older pet owners, especially those who are facing medical crises, in financial need or socially isolated is the priority of advocacy group Pets and Positive Ageing. The group started out lobbying ACT aged care facilities three years ago to allow residents to bring in their pets, is now active in NSW and is beginning to extend its advocacy nationally, says president Jan Phillips.

Previously, Phillips started and ran the charity PAWS (Pets are wonderful Support) for 12 years to support older people and those with illness to care for their pets with the help of volunteers.

“When I was running PAWS people used to say to me every day, ‘If I didn’t have this pet I would not be alive today,’” Phillips tells *CCR*.

Phillips says she was motivated by that knowledge to start lobbying and successfully recruited Northside Community Service to launch its own PAWS program, known as Pet Assistance and Wellbeing Service. The program supports frail or unwell older residents in North Canberra with pet care and the organisation helps Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) clients to use the program to access pet care services.

There are several other similar services around the country doing great work, says Phillips. Like-minded initiatives include RSPCA New South Wales’ Pets of Older Persons program, which helps people over the age of 65 look after their pets in times of crisis.

Also in NSW, Meals on Wheels in Bathurst runs the Short Term Emergency Pets Support program for local pet owners who fall within the CHSP target group.

Phillips would like to see such services happening everywhere or some kind of national system, and she says providers of in-home aged care and home support could better assist their clients with pets. “To elder people and people with disability, these animals are not pets, they are working animals. They are the thing that is keeping that person alive ... and replacing their family.”

Anna Sterken-Leslie, integrated service manager at Blue Care Caloundra Community Care, says her service recognises the importance of pets and the role they play in the emotional wellbeing of clients. From 2013-15, Caloundra Community Care was actively involved in the commonwealth-funded Pets for Life program run by the Caloundra Community Centre on the Sunshine Coast.

“It was an amazing program that helped our community clients keep their pets,” Sterken-Leslie tells *CCR*.

“Volunteers would visit the client’s home to walk their dog, clean up the kitty litter or yard, or ensure the pet was fed. Some elderly people were not prepared to go to the hospital, as it meant leaving their pet unattended, and the wonderful volunteer support alleviated this concern. The program also brought companionship to the lives of the community clients through the opportunity to interact with the volunteers.”

The federal funding for Pets for Life ran out in June 2015 and the program is no longer accepting referrals, however, Sterken-Leslie says their clients can choose to obtain assistance with their pets under their home care package.

Tomas Passeggi, Caloundra Community Centre community development co-ordinator, says the centre is resisting suggestions to modify the program to a user pays approach.

“It becomes a dog walking service, for example, rather than a visiting service and opportunity to make a connection with someone not wearing a uniform and name badge,” he says.