



Pets enrich senior life

Assisted-living sites see benefits, set rules for residents

LOUISA DANIELSON | For The Journal Gazette

Many pet owners couldn't imagine parting with their furry friends. However, there are times when there seems to be no alternative, such as when a pet owner has to have surgery and needs long-term hospital care or needs to enter an assisted-care facility.

For older residents, finding a home for their pet when life changes occur can be a difficult and stressful time. It becomes a bigger problem when seniors find themselves having to move from their home into a senior living facility.

The question comes up: What will happen to the pet?

While some communities allow pets, many others do not. But as the older population continues to live longer, creating a need for places that offer elder care, senior living communities are taking another look at how they view pets.

Heritage Park in Fort Wayne considers itself a pet-friendly community and has been able to accommodate residents' pets, although animals are considered on a case-by-case basis.

"We ... have somebody who just moved in (recently) for rehab, and she just had to have her Chihuahua with her," said Jane King, director of marketing.

Residents are also able to bring their pets at Coventry Meadows Assisted Living in Fort Wayne.

Mindy Balka, director of business development in the Senior Living Division for American Senior Communities, which operates the assisted-living facility, said the Coventry staff has seen many benefits that come from allowing pets to accompany their owners to a new home.

"Lowered blood pressure, lower anxiety, lower (risk of) strokes, and lower risk of heart disease," she said. "We have seen a number of positive results."

The American Heart Association released a statement in 2013 concluding that pet ownership is "probably associated with decreased cardiovascular disease risk."

Studies show that people tend to relax and feel less stressed when petting an animal. In addition, a review of 69 studies found evidence that human-animal interactions could lift mood and reduce stress and anxiety, according to an article in the Washington Post.

Also, studies have shown that pet therapy is good for helping people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Balka echoed these findings, noting that she has seen even mechanical animals (which purr or roll over when they are handled) help dementia and Alzheimer's residents. "We have seen such a positive response... they open up, they start talking," she said.

Both Heritage and Coventry usually have some sort of pets present in their facilities. Coventry offers pet therapies, and Heritage has resident animals.

"We sometimes call ourselves the Ark," King laughed. Heritage has had pets of many different types, including a bird aviary. Now, the facility is discussing the possibility of a butterfly aviary, and perhaps a flock of chickens, which could be kept outside.

Although they don't have community-owned pets, Coventry Meadows does encourage staff members to bring in their own pets to join the community and to reduce their stress of leaving a pet at home.

"As long as it doesn't interfere with their work... (and) as long as it is OK from a state standpoint," Balka said.

One Coventry employee brings a pet bearded dragon named Carnage. "The residents absolutely love it," Balka said.

Pet care is the responsibility of the resident, including making sure the animal is taken for walks, is trained and is able to cope with being around people. There is also the issue of size.

"We wouldn't want to have a horse," King laughed.

Safety for residents and staffers is also important. At Coventry, Balka said pets are not allowed in the nursing home/rehab area because there are shared hallways and areas where, for example, people with agility issues could be affected by a running cat or dog.

However, pets are allowed in the independent and assisted-living section. Even memory care residents may be able to take their pets along, if they pass an evaluation that checks to ensure they can still take care of the animal's needs, Balka said.

And while pets can be residents, King said it is necessary for residents to have a plan in place for care ahead of time. "The family members have to be committed to helping, too."

Bringing Fido

If you or someone you know is considering moving with a pet to an elder care facility, ask the following questions:

- ▲ How big is the pet? Some facilities don't allow certain animals and have restrictions on the size of pets.
- ▲ Is the pet friendly and able to cope with multiple people in one area?
- ▲ Is the pet trained?
- ▲ Does the pet have all its vaccinations and paperwork from a veterinarian?
- ▲ What pet costs may be charged by the facility?
- ▲ Who will help care for the pet if the resident is temporarily incapacitated?