

SENIOR CONNECTION

Information for Seniors & Caregivers

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Rooting for the Home Town Team

Robert P. Dwyer, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Suffice it to say that I'm not a huge fan of the "Home Town Team." Some of my staff have labeled me a "non-believer" and just, generally, a curmudgeon. But as I write this message, I will tell you all that my respect for the Red Sox, and particularly for Curt Schilling, has grown to new heights. No, I'm not becoming a fair-weather fan. Dad always told me to give credit where credit is due. So, now the Old Town Team has won the World Series, I am saying that I have become a "believer" and my Grandmother, and Dad, would be thrilled.

When I was a boy, Grandmother Dwyer (yes...that's what we called her) somehow imbued me with the desire to "root for the underdog." She meant the Red Sox, of course. Yet even though I tended to root for another team from the Empire State, the attitude that I took away from her was one of looking to those in need and being there as an advocate for them. In the last decade of working with older people, what I have seen is the aging network doing just that-advocating for people who are unable to advocate for themselves. Dad always said that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease," and my experience has shown this to be true.



Our legislators listen when we talk. The Massachusetts Congressional Delegation has been a great friend for seniors and their advocates in Washington. The Central Mass delegation on Beacon Hill has, for the most part, supported funding for the frail and most vulnerable seniors in our region. Mass Home Care and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging are in constant communication with our elected officials, rooting for the "underdogs" in our midst.

But as individuals we need to root for these same underdogs, for the frail and vulnerable and underserved. Waiting lists for home care and other services are expanding. Needs continue to grow. Senators and Representatives both in Washington and Boston need to know how we feel. Budget hearings in Boston are starting for next year, and the Feds still haven't passed a budget for THIS fiscal year.

Your voice is important. Next year will see the beginning of negotiations to reauthorize the federal Older Americans Act. When last reauthorized in the year 2000, it had taken nearly 4 years to get that job done. And even with the reauthorization, funding levels have not truly increased

since before that time. We can't let that happen again.

All of us need to make the case, to be the "squeaky wheel" on behalf of those services for older Americans that need the grease of funding to push forward. Let's be advocates for all older Americans, rooting for those who are the underdogs in our midst. In this way, the home town team of service providers will be able to continue their winning ways of providing the community based services we need to keep all our folks safely and securely at home.

2005 Statewide Needs Assessment Survey

In early January 2005, Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging will be working with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs to complete a random sample survey of elders throughout the state. This will be similar to the studies on elder needs we conducted in January of 1993, 1997 and 2001.

The primary purpose of the survey is to gather information on issues where elders may need assistance, e.g. transportation to medical appointments, home modification/repair, meal preparation and so on. The results will be used to help determine how and where federal and state funding for elder services are spent in Central Massachusetts and elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

It is therefore important that those elders who receive questionnaires in the mail return them to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs in the return envelope enclosed with the survey form as soon as possible.

The Benefits of Owning a Pet

A DOG A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY?

by Kerry Haberlin



A major trend pops from the statistic page. Surprise! One group of people visits the doctor's office far less frequently than another group - as many as 21% fewer the total number of visits, in fact. Which two groups, you ask? Young adults and senior citizens? Men and women? Tennis players and golfers?

The answer is: pet owners

and non-pet owners. According to recent studies, those people who share their homes and their lives with a pet visit their doctors far fewer times and report feeling far better, both physically and psychologically, than those people who do not. A German socioeconomic survey conducted in 1996 and again in 2001, for example, reported that those people (of the 10,000 total) who owned a pet in 1996 or had acquired a pet between 1996 and 2001 visited their doctors 10% less often than those who did not have a pet at either time, (6). Surveys conducted in the United States report the difference between pet owners and non-pet owners to be as high as 21%. Why do pet owners visit their

physician's waiting room less frequently? What do our furry, feathered, and fishy friends provide that "keeps the doctor away"? Is it time to replace the "apple" in the old formula for fewer doctors' appointments?

Owning a dog, or any other pet that requires outdoor activity, provides a stimulus for exercise. If a dog owner wants to avoid an accident on the carpet, he, obviously, takes the pooch out for a walk. Yet, pet ownership incurs physical health benefits far beyond those explained by "walking the dog." Pet owners, according to



several medical studies, have lower blood pressure, triglyceride and cholesterol levels. The results of a three-year study at the Baker Medical Research Institute of Melbourne, Australia demonstrated just this trend within a sample of 5,741 pet owners and non-pet owners. The lower blood pressure, triglyceride, and cholesterol levels among pet owners could not be explained by any other factors, such as cigarette smoking, diet, weight or socioeconomic profile, (3). Studies conducted by Dr. Aaron Katcher at the University of Pennsylvania showed that simply talking to or stroking an animal significantly lowered blood pressure and other measurable signs of stress, (7). Pet ownership has also been found to be closely linked to cardiovascular disease. A 1980 study conducted by Dr. Erika Friedmann and other more recent studies suggest that presence of a pet is the "strongest social predictor" of survival after a heart attack. In the 1980 study, 53 pet owners and 39 non-pet owners were followed in the year following a heart attack, (10). Of the 53 pet owners, 50 (94%) were still living and 3 (6%) had perished. Of the 39 non-pet owners, just 28 (72%) were living. Twenty-eight percent of the heart attack victims who did not own a pet, compared to just 6% of the victims who did own a pet, had passed away within the year, (9).



In addition to physical health benefits, pet ownership provides mental health benefits. First and

foremost, pets combat loneliness and depression by providing companionship, promoting a varied lifestyle, and providing an impetus for nurturing, (4). Because a pet owner must feed, water, and care for their animal friend, they feel important, wanted and needed, and, as such, not so lonely or isolated, (10). Pet owners, it seems, more so than non-pet owners, are better able to cope with adversity or trauma, such as the loss of a spouse or friend, (1). A pet's companionship and unconditional love contribute to coping ability and to the alleviation of mental stress from adverse life events. An American study of Medicare enrollees that measured the actual impact of these adverse life events on mental health reported that pet owners coped significantly better than non-pet owners, (6). Pets also provide a sense of security for their owners, especially those owners who live alone, (1).

Finally, on top of the physical and mental health benefits, pets seem to keep their owners socially "fit." A 1986 survey conducted by New, Wilson, and Netting ("How Community-Based Elderly People Perceive Pet Ownership") measured attitudes of a sample of elderly pet owners regarding the social benefits of their furry friend. According to the survey, 95% of the sample seniors talk to their pets, 82% say that their pet helps when they feel sad, 71% say that their pet helps when they feel physically bad, 65% suggest that touching their pet makes them feel better, and



57% admit to treating their pet as a confidant. New, Wilson, and Netting drew from this survey the notion that pets are "an integral component of the social support network for many individuals and, therefore, probably contribute to public health and well-being," (10). Pets are, for many elderly, members of the all-important social support network. Because animals require feed, water, walks, regular check-ups at the vet, and the like, many older pet owners who otherwise have little to organize daily activities around have a responsive and appreciative focus for their attention. The responsibility and routine of pet ownership brings the otherwise isolated senior into the pet owning network, whether through walking the dog in a park, visiting pet food and supply stores, or making a trip to the local veterinary clinic, (5). Pet owners and animal lovers make up an extensive network that keeps its owners connected and socially happy and healthy.



Kerry Haberlin interned at CMAA during the summer of 2004. Currently a student at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, she plans to graduate in May 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts in both Political Science and Philosophy.

For a list of the resources used in this article, please contact CMAA at (508) 852-5539, or (800) 244-3032 and request a copy.

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NEW LIFE FOR THE CONNECTION FOR CAREGIVERS!

Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging (CMAA) is pleased to announce that Ashdown Technologies, Inc. (www.AshdownTech.com), SeniorConnection.org web manager and host, has offered to temporarily underwrite an expanded Connection for Caregivers. This generous offer came as CMAA was prepared to downsize the website due to lack of funding. According to a statement from Ashdown:

“Ashdown Technologies, Inc. is a web design and hosting company that has been working closely with CMAA since 1998. The Connection for Caregivers website, including its interactive components, was developed with personnel from both organizations working hand-in-hand to offer a unique tool that met the needs of caregivers and the people they so courageously support.

Because of the effort and time invested in this project, we were very sad when we learned earlier this year that funding had run out for the site. Knowing the unique benefits of the site and not wanting to see it disappear, we began discussing how we could help. We quickly decided that offering our capabilities at no-charge was the right thing to do. To that end, as of September 1st, Ashdown Technologies began donating the necessary Internet services to keep the Connection for Caregivers website moving forward in its entirety. It is our great pleasure to be able to help CMAA and the community that they serve so well.”

The Board and Staff of Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging would like to thank Ashdown Technologies, Inc. for its generous support of this important effort to educate and assist caregivers of elders.

Your help, however, is still needed to keep the Connection for Caregivers going. For more information on how you can help, go to www.SeniorConnection.org, or call Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging at 508-852-5539/V/TDD or 1-800-244-3032/V/TDD.