

Moving Forward to Support Older Adults and Their Pets

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Pet ownership among seniors in Philadelphia has important implications for social service providers, other support networks (friends, family etc), and medical professionals who wish to help seniors to remain independent and healthy in their homes for as long as possible. Recent analyses by [Philadelphia Corporation for Aging](#)¹, the Area Agency on Aging for Philadelphia, show that 33% of all seniors age 60+ in Philadelphia have a pet, representing over 95,000 households. Interestingly enough, 40% have a cat, 38% have a dog, and 22% have a combination of species (both cats and dogs or other kinds of pets). Pet ownership climbs to 40% among those age 60-74. These findings are significant, for they show that pets are often found in the homes of seniors, many of whom have difficulties in maintaining them.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

Pets can provide health benefits:

- ✓ Pet owners have lower cholesterol and blood pressure, on average.
- ✓ Pet owners have fewer doctor visits and use less medication.
- ✓ Pet owners who have suffered heart attacks survive longer than those without a pet.

Many older adults consider a pet as part of their family, sometimes their only family. For this reason, it is important to understand the obstacles that exist for a senior to maintain a pet:

- ✓ Many older adults have functional health impairments or difficulties with activities of daily living (ADLs), which makes caring for a pet and buying, carrying, and preparing its food very difficult.
- ✓ Many are low income, which is an obstacle for vet visits and purchasing food, litter, and other items; some professionals who serve older adults report that many seniors feed their pets before themselves.
- ✓ Quite a few seniors with pets report living alone and professionals have noted that seniors are not following through with hospital procedures because they do not have someone to care for their pet.
- ✓ Some seniors refuse to move into new living situations because they are not allowed to bring their pet with them.
- ✓ Pets can be a trip hazard.

The chart below further lays out the findings from analyses.

Seniors who have at least 1 pet and:	5 Counties (% of 60+ in 5 counties)	Philadelphia (% of 60+ in Phila.)	4 Suburban Counties (% of 60+ in 4 suburbs)
Income below 200% of poverty	88,531 (11%)	42,866 (15%)	45,665 (9%)
Live alone	51,564 (7%)	21,340 (8%)	30,224 (6%)
Rate own health as fair or poor	65,340 (8%)	29,979 (11%)	35,361 (7%)
Has one or more IADL (mobility issues) limitations	58,464 (7%)	24,207 (9%)	34,258 (7%)

*All data from the 2010 Public Health Management Corporation's Regional Health Survey

PROGRESS IN PHILADELPHIA:

In February 2010, [GenPhilly](#)² (now a program of Philadelphia Corporation for Aging) held a groundbreaking event on pets and seniors, [Golden Years and Furry Ears: Linking Older Philadelphians to Homeless Pets](#)³. At the gathering, it was discovered that many aging network professionals were interested in this topic because of the health benefits that pets can have on older adults, but more importantly, because of the need to overcome obstacles that exist for seniors to continue to care for their pets. PCA has sought to highlight the issue over the past two years; it developed www.phillypetsandseniors.org and a [Facebook page](#)⁴ to assist professionals, caregivers, and seniors about pets; requested that a question about pet ownership be added to the Public Health Management Corporation's (PHMC) bi-annual regional health survey (the above data from 2010); and now provides workshops on this issue for professionals.



MOVING FORWARD: INNOVATIVE MODELS

Organizations nationwide have created initiatives with the purpose of assisting older, frailer adults with the responsibilities of pet care. Each initiative provides a unique constellation of services, such as free pet food, assistance with veterinary bills, dog walking, litter box cleaning, transportation to a vet or groomer, shopping for pet supplies and foster care or boarding for a pet if the owner is hospitalized. These models can serve as inspirations for social service organizations, veterinary schools, or nonprofits dedicated to animal welfare.

Here are a few links to websites about and initiatives on seniors and pets from other cities:

- ✓ **Pets and Elder Team Support (PETS), Jewish Association for Services for the Aged (JASA), NYC**
jasa.org/volunteering/volunteering-pets
- ✓ **Pets Forever, Colorado State University - Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Fort Collins, Colorado**
cuvth.colostate.edu/diagnostic_and_support/community_programs/pets_forever
- ✓ **Pet Assistance Program 'Tails A Waggin', Heritage Agency on Aging, Cedar Rapids, Iowa**
www.aging.iowa.gov/Documents/Nutrition/HealthyAgingUpdate/HealthyAgingUpdate5.4.pdf
[scroll to middle of page 4]
- ✓ **Ani-Meals on Wheels, The Humane Society of Berks County, in partnership with the Berks County Area Agency on Aging, Reading, Pennsylvania**
www.berkshumane.net/cms/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=113
- ✓ **Pets for Seniors, Edwards, Illinois**
www.petsforseniors.org/whoweare.html
- ✓ **The Pets for Life, New York City**
www.humanesociety.org/animal_community/shelters/pets_for_life_nyc.html
- ✓ **Seniors for Pets, Inc., Englewood, FL**
www.seniorsforpets.org
- ✓ **Pet Pals of Texas, San Antonio, Texas**
www.petpalsoftexas.org
- ✓ **Mureille's Place, Luzerne/Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania**
www.examiner.com/dogs-in-scranton/older-but-not-forgotten
- ✓ **University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, Institute for Human- Animal Connection** Not a service program, but a leader in training for animal-assisted social work and in human – animal interactions and health.
www.humananimalconnection.org

CONCLUSIONS

In Philadelphia, www.phillypetsandseniors.org serves as a clearinghouse for ideas, tips, and inspiration for this topic. A few tentative programs are forming here, acknowledging that aging and animal welfare advocates in the area understand the need to sustain older adults and their pets. The Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) has launched a Seniors for Seniors initiative. They hope to assemble a corps of volunteers that will assist senior citizens who adopt a senior animal through them. Also, the Humane Society of the United States Pets for Life program has begun in Philadelphia. The program is currently limited to subsidizing the costs of pet spay / neuter surgery for low income residents, but the original program in New York offers reduced cost veterinary care, free pet food, and temporary foster care for pets for people in crisis. Another local program to be aware of – especially if a pet needs to get to the vet: CCT (SEPTA Paratransit) does allow pets in carriers on their vehicles.

**PCA hopes to report on more progress to assist seniors with their furry companions in the coming year.
Stay tuned on www.phillypetsandseniors.org !!**

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