

MDS Alert

Policies and Protocols: If Your Facility Welcomes Animals, Make Policy A Priority

Most people aren't surprised that residents benefit from interacting with animals, but your facility should have official rules on paper.

Everyone knows that the presence of animals can make a huge difference in a person's demeanor, and that residents in long-term care facilities are particularly prone to immediate, immense transformations. A recalcitrant, quiet gentleman may turn warm and cooperative for days after getting to spend 10 minutes with a therapy dog, or a resident with dementia may melt into lucidity at the touch of a purring cat.

Long-term care facility administrators recognize this, with more than 80 percent of facility directors acknowledging their belief that companion animals helped to calm residents and that interactions with pets left residents happier, according to a study concerning Ohio nursing facilities, conducted by **Jason Stull, VMD, MPVM, PhD**, and **Timothy Landers, PhD, RN, CNP, CIC**, associate professors at **Ohio State University** in Columbus, Ohio.

For these reasons (and others), companion animals are an increasingly common sight in nursing facilities. While many facilities welcome animals as visitors - and require proof of certain veterinary treatments, like vaccinations, or certifications that demonstrate training to curb or express particular behaviors - not all have standard policies and protocols in place to protect residents, staff, and the animals themselves.

"You can maximize benefits and reduce risks in your facility by taking some simple steps: 1) choose the best animal; 2) ensure safe interactions between people and animals; 3) require evidence of proper animal care; and 4) create animal safety and cleanliness protocols for your facility," says a brochure, *Animals in Ohio Long-Term Care Facilities*, put out by Ohio State University (OSU).

Not Every Fido Will Do

No animal is completely predictable, nor is any a 100-percent safe bet. Fear or confusion can make even the sweetest and most even-tempered animal snap in certain situations. And some diseases that animals naturally carry, such as healthy reptiles that carry salmonella, are inherently riskier for older people with compromised immune systems.

It's crucial that your facility has policies in place that help self-select the best animals for long-term care facility environments.

"Choose animals with advanced training and use certified animals when possible. Allow domestic animals like cats, dogs, and fish. Avoid animals that have a higher chance of making residents sick such as reptiles, amphibians, rodents, and exotic species," Stull and Landers say, in a protocols worksheet for Ohio facilities, titled "Model Animal Protocols for Long-Term Care Facilities."

Though both staff and residents may light up at the thought of a miniature horse or bouncy goat gamboling through your facility's halls, Stull and Landers recommend against allowing farm animals as therapy animals because of the diseases they could transmit to resident.

While puppies and kittens are especially cute, younger animals are less predictable and possibly more dangerous to residents than mature animals.

Monitor Both Animals and Residents

Making sure someone on staff directly supervises all interactions between animals and residents can go a long way in curbing potentially dangerous situations. For example, if a resident is not being gentle enough when touching the animal, a staff member could intervene before the animal reacts; animals tend to show signs of discomfort before making their displeasure known.

Top tip: Request that dogs and cats that visit your facility have their nails trimmed regularly. Trimmed cat claws, especially, can be the difference in a cat's benign batting of a resident versus a nasty, infection-prone scratch.

Stull and Landers also recommend keeping animals within certain areas of your facility and prohibiting them from being able to access others. Keep animals out of kitchens, dining areas, and bathrooms, as well as the rooms of sick residents, they add, noting that residents that interact with animals in these situations may be more prone to greater health risks.

Make sure that no one feeds the animals table scraps or other food that would be inappropriate or unsafe for the animals - or increase the chance of any untoward or unsafe behavior. Stull and Landers suggest going as far as to dictate any visiting animals' diets all the time, including prohibiting raw diets for any animals that visit the facility and requiring that they receive conventional, commercially prepared diets instead.

Assign Animal Protocols to a Particular Team Member, Committee

Before any animals visit, form a team of unbiased staff members, including an administrator, to set protocols for your facility - and to have the responsibility of following up on any incidents that may occur.

"It is beneficial to create an internal committee because it will allow unbiased decisions to be made about the animal protocols and animal activities within the facility. It is advantageous to create a committee that is interdisciplinary which will contribute to informed and well-rounded decisions about animal activities within the LTCF," Stull and Landers say.

Make sure these recommendations are followed by designating a particular staff member to oversee and approve any animal visits, as well as the animals' respective handlers.

OSU has developed a handy protocols worksheet for Ohio nursing facilities to use when considering allowing animals. The protocols include guidance on what information your facility should require from handlers and animals, with specific recommendations about veterinary care and training the animal should have before visiting the facility, as well as advice on how handlers should steward the animals while visiting the facility.

The protocols workshop also includes suggestions on initial training for staff, as well as continuing education.

Don't miss: Check with your individual state to see whether there are any regulations or laws you need to know about before inviting animals into your facility.

See the OSU recommendations for Ohio facilities here:

>https://kb.osu.edu/bitstream/handle/1811/79017/Model_Animal_Protocols_for_LTCF.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y.