

# Puppy love can bring benefits to nursing homes

Irish Therapy Dogs, a registered charity that utilizes the health benefits of ‘mans best friend’, is actively looking for care centres that would like to avail of the services it provides, writes *Brian O’Sullivan, Chairman of Irish Therapy Dogs*

*...Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.*

Any dog owner will tell you that their devoted hound is the most loyal friend they have. This strong bond, based upon unconditional love, nurtures emotional well being. Recent studies have also proved that canine companionship brings a number of health benefits, such as lowered blood pressure, lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels, as well as increased production of serotonin and dopamine.

One explanation for these therapeutic effects is that a dog fulfills the most basic human need to touch. The companionship of a dog can help to calm and soothe us, ease anxiety and boost our mood. Stroking, holding and fussing over a canine friend helps reduce our sense of isolation and loneliness.

If we accept all of the above, then we also accept that a dog is therapeutic. Young and old, fit and frail, alert and impaired, all of us can benefit from the presence of a dog.

Irish Therapy Dogs, a registered charity founded in 2008, has undertaken the task of establishing a national network of volunteers who, accompanied

by their faithful dogs, visit residences where the companionship of a dog is missing. More than 270 teams (a handler and their dog) make weekly visits to day care centres, hospices, hospitals, long stay nursing and retirement homes all across the country.

Acceptance into Irish Therapy Dogs is governed by a strict code of conduct, ensuring that the organisation’s services are of the very highest standard. Before making their first visit, all volunteers must successfully complete a rigorous application process including Garda clearance, submission of two references and interview. In addition, individuals must demonstrate that their dog is obedient, good natured, clean and well groomed. During visits, volunteers are required to wear full uniform, and their vibrant golden sweatshirts (coats for the dogs) have become visible symbols of professional integrity.

All visiting teams devote one hour each week to their assigned care centre. Once there, they discreetly circulate amongst the residents, and always include those who are bed-ridden and confined to their rooms. Many volunteers will describe the joy their visits bring, and without exception, every participant is

humbled by the experience. In the course of that hour, it is not unusual for care centre staff to report startling changes in their residents. Sometimes, while stroking a dog, residents with advanced dementia respond positively, uttering words or using body language to convey their pleasure.

Irish Therapy Dogs receives no government support, so independent fund-raising has to be vigorous. Care centres are asked to donate a €100 registration fee. This sum, along with volunteers’ subscriptions, ensures that the organisation has sufficient funds to operate – a huge challenge, given today’s bleak economic forecast.

Volunteer numbers are increasing daily; consequently demand for care centre placements is huge. Currently, the charity is actively looking for care centres that would like to avail of their services.

Please remember, a dog is therapeutic and an Irish Therapy Dogs visiting team can make a tremendous difference to the well being of every resident in your care.

**Irish Therapy Dogs’ can be contacted at 01 2189302 and you can visit [www.irishtherapydogs.ie](http://www.irishtherapydogs.ie)**



*Above: The Junior Members of Irish Therapy Dogs, the organisation’s young young ambassadors*

*Centre: The Irish Therapy Dogs Visiting Team of Sally McCaffrey and Shako visiting Glebe House Nursing Home with junior members Sarah and Tom*



*Right: The services provided by Irish Therapy Dogs nurtures emotional well being. Canine companionship brings happiness – a dog fulfills the most basic human need to touch*

