

The Australian Pets and People Network

Benchmarks for planning companion animal support programs for the elderly and disabled living at home.

- A companion animal support program includes companion animals such as dogs, cats, birds, fish and reptiles.
- Development of companion animal support programs must recognize and embed holistic, client centred principles such as the Active Service Model in their development and planning. In other words, priority should be given to the kinds of services clients need and want as opposed to what organizations believe their clients want and need. This includes: short term emergency fostering (preferably in the home of a volunteer), exercise of dogs which reflects the RSPCA's guidelines, ie: daily exercise if required, which may mean two or more volunteers must be assigned, assistance with grooming, feeding and sanitary management of cats and dogs, transport to vet and for shopping, etc. A holistic companion animal support program recognizes that the companion animal may have given many years of loyal service and companionship to the client. An explicit end of life strategy for the rehoming of pets left homeless by the death or relocation of clients to avoid the pet being euthanized or left at a shelter is strongly recommended.
- Program sustainability via recurrent or otherwise secure funding is essential in companion animal support programs. More so than any other social support program, clients on pilot or short term programs can be severely impacted if services are withdrawn. A companion animal support program's primary aim is to maintain and support the continuation of the relationship between the companion animal and the client. A sudden stop to that support can mean the end of that relationship and the end of the companion animal's life.
- Clients with companion animals are often the hardest to reach and while they may need support a suspicious or protective response is not uncommon. Development of sensitive and considered strategies to recruit clients which take into account the need for repeat visits, fostering confidence and a clear outline of services and confidentiality is strongly recommended.
- Programs should appoint a dedicated coordinator. Companion animal support programs are specialist, time intensive programs and are best served by a coordinator employed specifically for that program.

- Development of partnerships with sponsors, support services including local business and council animal management units is strongly recommended.
- Consider the need for a separate funding allotment for responsible animal management requirements such as pet registration, microchipping, leads, tags and collars, training, etc., and emergency needs in the case of financial hardship.
- Volunteers are the backbone of companion animal support programs and recruitment, induction, training, matching and support of volunteers should meet the highest best practice standards. Volunteers contribute in many ways. For example, as (by their association with maintaining the relationship between people and pets) contributors to the community's social capital.
- Programs should include specific recognition of volunteers via social get togethers, support and information sessions, newsletters, websites, etc., and by ensuring that volunteers have ready access to program staff for support. Counselling including grief and bereavement associated with human and animal loss are suggested services.
- Pets in the HACCC sector are generally only acknowledged in assessment documentation, etc., as a hazard, ie: in negative terms. OH&S and risk control is a growing consideration in human services. The extremely low number of incidents associated with companion animal support programs is an indicator that companion animal support programs can be planned with a balance of factors rather than being risk control centred, ie: reasonable risk control measures but also ensuring the volunteer, client and companion animal enjoy the services of the program without being put off or constantly concerned with an excessive OH&S focus.

Please contact the Australian Pets and People Network on: info@realanimals.com.au for further information.