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Therapy dogs give private 'screening' at nursing home

BY BILL BENGTON

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NHC HealthCare residents have had highly limited social opportunities in the past three months, as nursing homes around the country have cut off the flow of visitors due to the coronavirus pandemic and its especially lethal impact on senior citizens.

The NHC traffic of late June, however, included some two- and four-legged visitors who got as close as they could without sparking any medical alarm. Therapy dogs were part of the scene, as they were one week earlier, approaching screens at a sunroom and allowing residents to reach out and at least get their hands sniffed by the pooches on duty and share some thoughts on canines and whatever other topics come to mind.

Visiting were Augusta resident Kathryn Whittle and her dog, Tootsie; North Augusta resident Lynn Ealey and Trigger; and North Augusta resident Jackie Arnett and Rocky.

Arnett said she appreciated the chance to have an in-person visit rather than a "virtual" encounter via computers and phones.

"I like it. We did the virtual ones, but it's very hard to get feedback from people. It's nice to see human reactions," she said.

"The dogs don't know to look at a phone," Ealey said, noting that the virtual visit was interesting in terms of having involved someone dressed in full personal protective gear – gloves and a gown, mask and face shield



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BENGTON

Kathryn Whittle, hauling therapy dog Tootsie, visits the NHC nursing home in North Augusta, with resident Cedric Hatfield and activities assistant Alyson Craven on hand behind a screen.

– "running around the facility holding up a phone for residents to see the dogs."

Conversations with residents in therapy situations, Arnett said, tend to focus on canines.

"If they want to ask questions, that's great. Usually, they just want to tell you about a dog they had when they were younger or when

they lived ... independently."

Ealey said she appreciated the fact that the NHC reached out to the therapy dog team to request a visit. She also addressed a misperception in the midst of the ongoing worldwide health crisis.

"People assume that the dogs are happy that

they're home with their people all the time and they're really not. They miss their visits. The bottom line is, the dogs miss their visits."

She pointed out that Trigger, now 10 years old, will reach his seventh anniversary as a therapy dog in July. He normally makes about three visits a week and has done more than 1,000 visits over the years.

"He has people that he's been seeing for many years. They miss him, and he misses them."

Trigger, who could be considered a senior citizen in dog years, also has some experience as a medical patient – not just as a visitor. He suffered a tear in his right rear leg's ACL in late February and has been on the rebound with help from two local vets: Dr. Eva Bogner, with Aiken Pet Fitness and Rehabilitation; and Dr. Holly Landes, with Eastview Animal Wellness, in Augusta.

Trigger's past few months, while not landing him in a retirement home as a resident, have included such elements as prayer, acupuncture, heat, pool therapy, laser treatments, Chinese herbs and stretching at home.

Trigger, Ealey and their like-minded cohorts are "looking for opportunities," Ealey said, confirming that tremendous changes in their schedules and activities have arisen since mid-March. "There's usually a team that's available ... Because we're all volunteers, everybody's schedule is different, but if we get a request, usually there's somebody that can go."



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