

Animal (Non-Human) Companionship for Adults Aging in Place during COVID-19: A critical support, a source of concern and potential for social work responses (Letters to the Editor)

Older adults living in the community are at disproportionate risk for loneliness and isolation and associated increased health risks (Malcolm, Frost & Cowie, 2019); this risk has been further exacerbated by the self-isolation recommended during this pandemic (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). However, many older adults living in the community have a potential intervention for such embedded in their lives—their pet. To explore such, the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) convened an international work group of experts in the fields of aging and human-animal interaction beginning in 2016 to develop a roadmap for understanding how pets may positively impact loneliness, social isolation, depression, and mobility among older adults (Resnick & McCune, 2019). The National Institute of Aging released an infographic that included pet adoption as a strategy to reduce loneliness and social isolation in older adults (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/sites/default/files/social-isolation-infographic-508.pdf>). Nationally, pets live in more than half of our homes (AVMA, 2017-2018). In a study of users of food pantries in Western Pennsylvania 53% of those aged 75 and older were living with one or more pets (Rauktis & Lee, 2019). While pets may be an invaluable source of support for older adults who are experiencing increased isolation and loneliness, unfortunately most social workers are not trained to include human-animal relationships in assessments and interventions. Social work inclusion of human-animal interaction considerations within routine practice is increasing, but it is still the exception rather than the rule. In this letter we present a case for why and how social workers who work with older adults should assess and respond to human-pet interaction; while important on a routine basis, given the current pandemic situation and subsequent increases in isolation experienced by older adults, it is especially crucial to be responsive to their relationships with pets as potential strengths, stressors, or both.

A major risk factor, other than COVID infection for older adults living in the community during this pandemic is social isolation (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Research has consistently shown that social isolation and loneliness in older adults is associated with deleterious physical and mental health outcomes including cardiovascular disease (Thurston, 2009; Udell et al., 2012), depression (Cacioppo et al, 2006) and is a risk factor for accelerated mortality (Pennix, et al., 1997).). Pets have the potential to be particularly therapeutic for older adults because their pet is a primary source of social, emotional and psychological support (Krause-Parello, 2008; McNicholas, 2014; Rauktis, 2019). However, not all older adults realize the full benefits that having a pet can provide. Social workers are experts at mobilizing strengths and resources within the social and emotional contexts of clients, and there are numerous ways that they can help leverage and augment the benefits that older adults can experience through the presence of a pet in their homes. Social workers can do such using telephone screenings, check-ins and telemedicine.

Companion animals need to be part of the psychosocial assessment so that the presence of an animal in the home is in the record and the benefits and challenges are known and incorporated into service plans. Pets can be included in genograms and questions about how

the pets connect them to the outside world incorporated in the assessment and in the plan (Hodgson et al., 2015). Rauktis (2019) found that pets were more of a social connector for older adults than younger adults in that pets motivated older adults to converse outside the home with neighbors about their pets. With social distancing, these connections can be maintained in virtual or digital ways. For example, Rauktis (2019) reports that one dog owner would call her shut in friends with her jack Russell terrier on the line. This was the social highlight for both the dog owner, the shut-in and the dog!

Companion animals can be part of goal-directed wellness plans. Dogs need to be walked, cats need active play—walking and bending and tossing are physical activities that can be practiced in the home routinely and in the case of walking outside, in short distance around the home with protective personal equipment.

Pets are a window into engagement and should be utilized. Rauktis (2019) reports in her study that when she asked older adults to talk about their pet, the response was uniformly positive and their older respondents became visibly brighter. If an isolated older adult appears unwilling to talk about themselves, it is very likely that they will want to talk about their pet/pets.

Planning for fun. In the time of COVID-19, we need to be creative about fun and social workers can brainstorm fun ideas for activities with pets—themed parties, silly photos, writing stories about the pet.

Social workers should also be cognizant of the challenges of aging in place with a pet during the pandemic. Limited or lack of access to pet food may result in feeding their pet human food, decreasing their caloric and protein intake, and human food is not formulated for nutritional needs of animals. Another challenge is may be reluctant to seek treatment for virus or leave their homes for hospitalization due to concerns about the companion animal.

Ways that social workers can mitigate or prevent some of these challenges are to make connections with the community outreach staff in animal welfare agencies in order to help clients access needed resources such as free pet food and low cost wellness services for the animals. Having a plan for a trusted person(s) to care of the pet is imperative now. Social workers can help them make a plan as a preventative act instead of waiting for an emergency. The plan would include helping the client create a virtual “go bag” for the pet with food, crate/carrier or leash, toys, authorize power of attorney for care of the pet, vet records and identification and write down pet routines and behaviors.

If the older adult can remain in the home with COVID, they should self-quarantine with the pet then ask a friend or supports to leave food and supplies outside the house and taking dogs for a walk using Protective Precautions. Again, having someone identified to do this before the older adult becomes ill or needs hospitalization is critical as there will not be time to do this when they become acutely ill. Finally if hospitalization is necessary then the choice is either keep animals in home with someone coming in and caring for them or moving the pet(s) to another home or boarding. This should be discussed with the older adult prior to a medical crisis as they know their pet best and are not likely to get help or go to the hospital if they feel that their pet will be harmed. We are working on a resource guide at this time for “aging in place with pets in Western

Pennsylvania”, created by the University of Pittsburgh Hartford Scholar students. Other regions have similar guides and social workers should have this resource at hand during this pandemic.

To summarize, this pandemic has highlighted the import of routinely including the human-animal bond as potentially both a strength and stressor within social work practice with older adults. Through explicitly supporting older adults’ relationships with their pets, associated benefits may be leveraged to help ameliorate increases in social isolation, loneliness, and other pandemic-related stressors(Hoy-Gerlach, Rauktis & Newhill, 2020). Helping to alleviate stressors experienced by older adults related to having pets can likewise help to preserve having the pet as an ongoing support. In a time when older adults – a population already at disproportionate risk of isolation and associated health issues – are experiencing dramatic increases in isolation due to COVID-19 vulnerability, inclusion of human-animal bond considerations can be a valuable way to help offset such.

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