

# Effect of a Residential Dog on Quality of Life and Loneliness in Veterans living at the North Florida/South Georgia VAMC, Community Living Center Lake City Division



Ellen E. Davis, MSN, RN, CHPN

## INTRODUCTION

- Research demonstrates Pet Therapy (i.e. having a dog visit long term care neighborhoods regularly) decreases loneliness in elderly adults and aggressiveness in persons with dementia.
- North Florida/South Georgia (NF/SG) Community Living Center (CLC, formerly known as the Nursing Home Unit) aimed to make the facility more home-like for Veteran residents. One way to help transform culture of CLC and meet our objective is to promote normalcy by using residential pets.
- Two-phase study examining effects of a CLC residential pet was planned. Serenity Place (the hospice unit at the NF/SG VAMC) was given a two year old black Labrador Retriever, Jodi, by the VetDog organization, a subsidiary of the American Guide Dog Federation. She is a trained guide dog and came with a large skill set. She was tested to assure for appropriate temperament. Serenity Place is the first of the six CLC neighborhoods to have a residential pet.



Jodi



Staff getting trained on Jodi's commands:  
Sharon Timmons, Tina Musgrove, Shanette Brown

## AIMS AND METHODS

- **Phase I** was to use qualitative interviews with residents to determine the impact of having a residential dog on the Hospice neighborhood at the Lake City VAMC. We were interested to find out: what life was like in the CLC before and after Jodi arrived, a description of a typical visit with Jodi, a description of the best and worst thing about having Jodi live on Hospice.
- **Phase II** was to measure the effects of the residential dog on self-reported loneliness in Hospice residents without cognitive impairment. Methods included the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a questionnaire reporting: frequency of visits with Jodi, extent of contact with her, number of visits weekly with her, length of time spent with her, and self-reported “feelings they had before and after contact with her”. (Phase II was never completed).
- ExpertScan software was used to create the data collection tools and both Phase I and Phase II were approved by University of Florida IRB and NF/SG VHS R & D committee, and required regulatory entities.

## Results

Study was stopped and closed due to three main reasons:

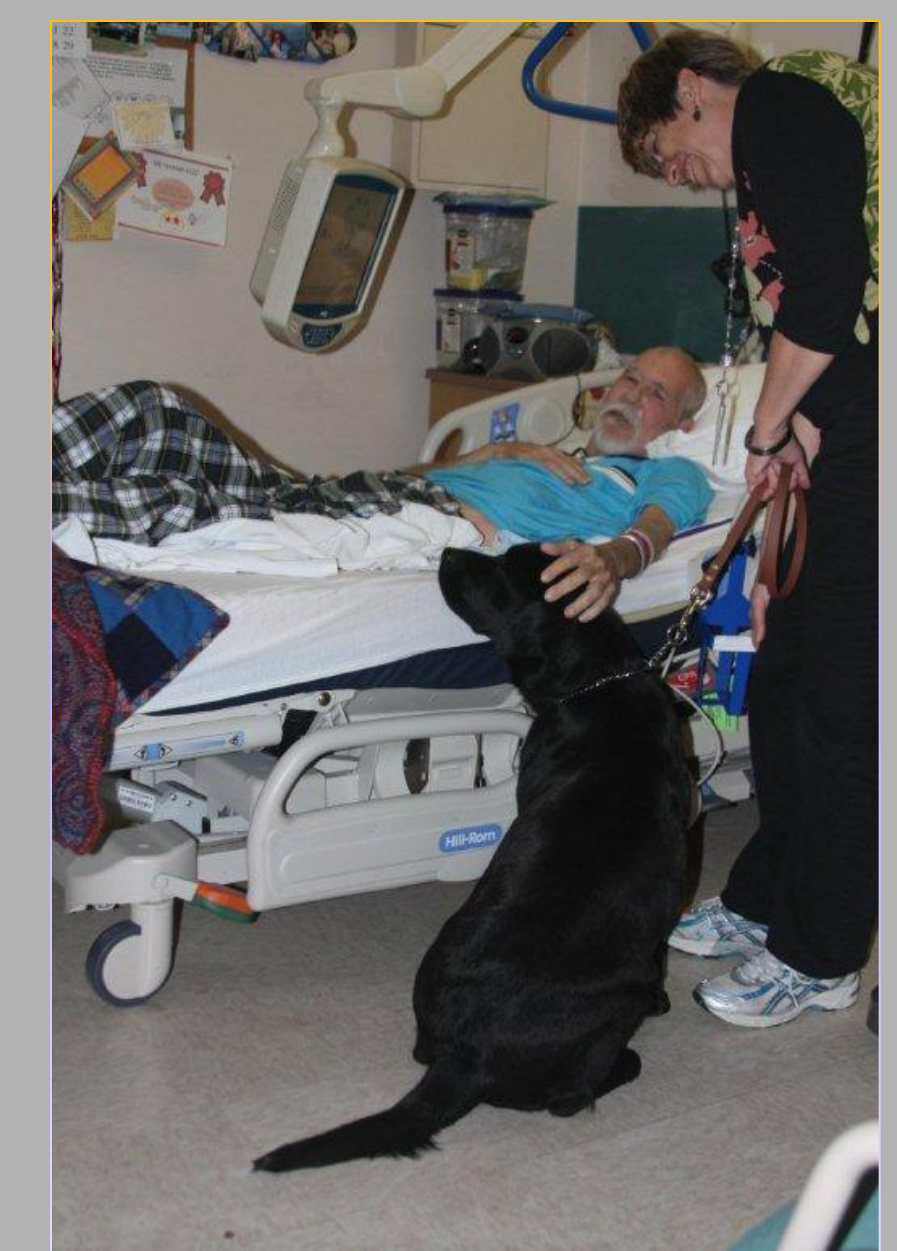
1. Low numbers of subjects and inability to reach statistical power: only 8 residents signed informed consent, 6 residents completed Phase I. Many people wait very late to enter Hospice.
2. Overwhelmingly positive response to Jodi from staff, residents & resident's family members - who did not want to think Jodi may leave “after the study.” **She was adopted permanently by the Unit**
3. Time barriers encountered by the PI for conducting research.

## DISCUSSION

- As our Veteran population ages, many will come to live in a CLC neighborhood. Admission necessitates a number of losses – of familiar surroundings, pets and personal belongings. These losses can predispose the Veteran to loneliness.
- Several studies examining effects of animal-assisted therapy demonstrate visiting dogs enhance and enrich quality of life, increase socialization and help residents cope better with stressful life events, as long as the dog continues to visit.
- Little research has been done in the area of the effects of pets **residing** on a CLC neighborhood.
- More research is needed to examine Pet Therapy as a means of decreasing loneliness levels for our Veterans in long-term care.

### Outcomes/Lessons Learned:

Jodi came to mean a great deal to Veterans, families and care partners. Visiting children seem to love Jodi. Having an ill family member who is dying can be frightening and confusing for anyone, especially children. Jodi helps the children see joy on the Hospice neighborhood and helps them cope with the stress. The wife of one of our Veterans stated “I love Jodi. She loves me unconditionally. When I pet her, I feel good all over – she has such a warmth. She knows exactly where and how to sit so that I can reach to pat her. It is hard to put into words what she means – I just love her.”



Jodi getting love from one of our residents (informed consent for this photograph was obtained from Veteran for use of this photo).