



Children's Hospital of Orange County
Best Evidence and Recommendations (BEaR)

Best Practices to Engage Facility Dogs in Staff and Provider Wellness

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Abstract

This project aimed to identify the best practices to engage facility dogs in therapeutic relationships that would promote staff and provider wellness and increase joy in work. Eighteen articles were identified on the topic. Common themes emerged from the evidence, including how animal-assisted interventions with staff decrease staff anxiety, hyperactivity, and stress levels; are associated with increased work performance and engagement; and improved coping for staff managing burn-out and feeling drained. Recommend short-term strategies, including selected interventions to expand the current role of the two resident dogs to help meet the growing need for associate and provider engagement. The goal is to take the amount of time currently spent to support staff and intentionally develop the program into more evidence-based, meaningful interventions. The long-term goal is to invest in the addition of seven unit-based dogs across the inpatient and outpatient settings. More unit-based dogs would be needed to support a formal request program, where associates and providers can identify a department or group within the organization that could benefit from animal-assisted therapy, and a resident dog team would be able to meet that need.

Keywords

Facility dogs, animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal therapy, employee burnout, employee wellness, healthcare workers, organizational behavior, staff wellness, and workplace well-being.

PICO(T)

In the hospital setting, what are the best practices to engage facility dogs in therapeutic relationships to promote staff and provider wellness and increase joy in work?

Background and Significance

Healthcare personnel are experiencing stress, grief, and loss at high levels leading to burnout and high job turnover (Etingen et al., 2020). In response, healthcare institutions seek innovative ways to decrease provider stress and increase job satisfaction. An emerging new program that



uses facility dogs paired with certified child life specialists (CCLS) to help patients reach their clinical goals can also have positive, secondary benefits of decreasing stress and anxiety of staff and providers hospital-wide.

Several indices have validated the need for creative ways to support staff at CHOC. The annual Press Ganey staff engagement survey informs the organization as to how associates feel about the work climate. Five response have been trending downward for the last three years as follows: 1) "This organization supports me in balancing my work life and personal life", 2) "The environment at this organization makes associates in my work unit want to go above and beyond what's expect of them", 3) "I rarely lose sleep over work issues", 4) "I rarely lose sleep over work issues", and 5) "the amount of job stress I feel is reasonable". These are areas where our resident dog program could make a difference to positively impact associate mental health and wellness.

In addition to the Press Ganey Survey, a mini hackathon was conducted at CHOC, where 250 participants were gathered to discuss ways to improve organizational culture. Thirty-one percent of participants felt that it was essential to focus on the physical and mental wellness of CHOC Associates. There was a specific focus on animal-assisted therapy as one way to enhance wellness within our organization, stating, "enhance pet therapy for staff: "Pawffice Hours." Also noted were multiple comments, including, "Have events throughout the year for employees to get away from the bedside,"; "Increase the presence of companion dogs/volunteer dogs for staff,"; and "have designated pet therapy dog for staff on each floor."

Until the middle of 2021, CHOC did not have a Resident Dog Program; only a very beloved volunteer pet therapy program existed (see Table 1 for definition). As of 2022, we have two full-time resident dogs, Lois and Odessa. Lois and Chloe provide clinical coverage on all the inpatient units listed here. Odessa and her child life specialist handler Janessa are our first unit-based team exclusively dedicated to the Mental Health Inpatient Center. Although this EBP project is focused on staff wellness, it is important to note that both Lois and Odessa's priority responsibilities are focused on patient care as defined by their organizational roles and the expectation from our partnership with Canine Companions. This organization trained and provided both of our dogs.

Since the start of this program, our dogs have supported the associates and providers in various ways. Some of the formal events include our beloved quarterly Dogs and Donuts events. These are a big hit, not only because Lois and Odessa are present but also because our darling volunteer pet therapy dogs are also present. "Pawffice Hours" are being hosted on the inpatient units where Lois is present in a breakroom or a respite room during certain hours, just for that unit to enable associates and providers to come and receive one-on-one snuggle time with Lois. Lastly, multiple bridge events throughout the year for day and night shifts have been held, as well as holiday parade-style events, where Lois is dressed up, handing out swag and



candy, and taking photos with associates and providers.

Facility dog or resident dog	Full-time employees of CHOC are trained explicitly from birth to help children reach clinical goals and help patients and families cope with stressful situations. A resident dog is the same as a facility dog; this is just the term CHOC has coined for branding purposes, so as it pertains to our program, both terms can be used synonymously.
Therapy dog	Pets of volunteers trained to bring comfort, play, and positive experiences to our patients. They are not here full-time, they typically visit once a week, and unlike our resident dogs, they are limited to certain areas of the hospital and are not used for clinical purposes.
Staff Wellness or well-being	A state in which people perceive their lives as going well, including aspects of their physical, emotional, and psychological health, productivity, and economic well-being
Joy in Work	You feel connected with what you do and why you do it. It is the feeling of success and fulfillment that comes from doing work that matters. It connects us with colleagues and patients through a sense of shared purpose (Institute for Healthcare Improvement Whitepaper, 2017)

Framework

This EBP project utilizes the “Translating Evidence into Practice: CHOC’s Approach to EBP” model, adapted from the EBPI Model © 2007 Brown & Ecoff (Ecoff, Stichler & Davidson, 2020)

Search for the Evidence

Databases searched for this review included CINAHL, PubMed, EBSCO, OVID, Cochrane, and Google Scholar. Key search words: facility dogs, animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal therapy, employee burnout, employee wellness, healthcare workers, organizational behavior, staff wellness, workplace well-being. This search yielded more than 100 articles about animal-assisted therapy about patient and staff wellness; 18 were found to have the applicable information.

Critical Appraisal and Synthesis of the Evidence

- An overarching theme is animal-assisted therapy's positive effects for staff and providers. There have been multiple benefits noted in incorporating animals into therapeutic interventions (McCullough, 2016).
- There is robust evidence surrounding animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and volunteer pet therapy dogs and their handlers (Ginex, 2018). However, there is less evidence regarding facility dogs and how they can support staff in healthcare settings.



- The systematic review by Acquadro Maran et al. (2022) shared that the outcomes for animal-assisted interventions with staff have included:
 - A decrease in anxiety and hyperactivity, and in stress levels
 - An increase in work performance and engagement
 - An increase in coping with burnout and feelings of being drained.
- Inpatient nurses experience higher stress than other outpatient units by measuring cortisol levels (Machova, 2019).
- Evidence points to an increase in workforce morale (Acquadro Maran et al., 2022) and a boost in mood (Etingen et al., 2020) with facility dogs.
- A survey regarding barriers to animal-assisted therapy in the workforce concluded that people viewed pets as a distraction, complained of risk for allergies or uncleanliness, and expressed fear or dislike for pets (Wells, 2001).
- Health care providers may often feel guilty if they care for themselves and find it difficult to leave their workspace or unit to engage in wellness activities. Acquadro Maran et al. (2022) recommend further study into this idea of “dog on demand.” This paradigm allows providers to interact with a facility dog in or near their workspace whenever they need it, at least during part of their shift. The dog would be the same dog assigned to support their patients. Ten different hospitals doing similar work to support staff utilizing facility dogs were surveyed. Eight hospitals provided feedback to a questionnaire with the following information gleaned from the results:
 - If the goal is solely interaction, more significant events with shorter interactions reaching more people tend to be effective. However, if the goal is education, reaching fewer people for more extended periods of time is more effective.
 - Per handlers, dogs, are more exhausted when they are “paraded around” during scheduled rounding sessions, but when visiting smaller groups, the dogs are more engaged with staff.

Practice Recommendations

Immediate short-term actions:

- Expand the current role of the two resident dogs to help meet the growing need for associate and provider engagement. The goal is to take the amount of time currently spent to support staff, and intentionally take those current hours and develop the program into more evidence-based, meaningful interventions.
- Increase night shift support to provide more support to them in shorter, more casual interactions and more therapeutic “Pawffice Hours” time in smaller groups on inpatient units.
- Collaborate with our interdisciplinary team members, namely Spiritual Care, in an event that could be called “PAWS for a PAUSE.” Building on the concept of Tea for the Soul, this idea is about creating a safe space for associates and providers to come and get some quiet time with one of our dogs while also having a chaplain or another provider present to provide that human-to-human emotional support as well.



- Add these events to the wellness resource menu to integrate our resident dog program into that new initiative.

Intermediate goal:

- Secure funding for a second inpatient, consultation-based resident dog to meet the growing demands for patient care and staff and provider support.

Long-term recommendations:

- Invest in seven more unit-based dogs, both inpatient and outpatient.
- Create a Request Program, potentially called “Paw Patrol,” where associates and providers can identify a department or group within the organization that could benefit from animal-assisted therapy and a resident dog team would be able to meet that need.

Outcome Measures

- Use a pre-post intervention assessment using a visual analog mood scale as a good day measure, consistent with IHI and Joy in Work Framework. For example, associates and providers would answer a simple “are you having a good day?” questionnaire on a 1-5 Likert scale pre- and post-intervention.
- Collect summary descriptive data where they can track attendance and the number of events held and associates and providers reached.
- Measure the outcomes on our dogs and pay attention to the impact this kind of support has on their ability to do their patient care job.

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