

I.C. Hospice launches Pet Peace of Mind

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TO VOLUNTEER

» Pet Peace of Mind: To learn more about Iowa City Hospice's new animal care program, contact Sarah Neary at 351-5665 or Sarah.neary@iowacityhospice.org.
» Walk for Dignity: Iowa City Hospice's 12th annual fundraising walk will be at 1 pm. April 17 at Willow Creek Park in Iowa City.
» To contribute or register, contact Judy Frits at 688-4219 or visit IowaCityHospice.org/calendar/walk.html

Two mornings a week, University of Iowa student Sarah Gisleson meets up with her new friend, a friendly pug belonging to a patient receiving care from Iowa City Hospice.

Gisleson, a pre-nursing student, takes the dog out for walks and some much-needed play time, something the pet owner is no longer able to manage because of her limited mobility.

Iowa City Hospice, which is launching a new program called Pet Peace of Mind, hopes to find more volunteers like Gisleson who are willing to walk and groom pets, drive them to veterinarian visits and even serve as foster families while their owners are receiving end-of-life care.

"She's a really good dog," Gisleson said. "She barked a little when I first came, but she really doesn't bark anymore. She's really comfortable with a volunteer coming to take her out."

Iowa City Hospice received a grant from the Banfield Charitable Trust last year to start Pet Peace of Mind -- a national program that enables patients to keep their pets at home throughout the end-of-life process.

Sarah Neary, Iowa City Hospice's volunteer program coordinator and a social worker, said with many patients, caring for a pet in the latter stages of life can be a challenge, if not impossible. But parting ways with a beloved dog or cat can be even more difficult, she said.

"Sometimes they're just kind of an afterthought," Neary said. "The mom has to move to the nursing home, but the dog goes to the pound. Or efforts are being made to keep mom in the home, but she's not able to care for the dog or change the kitty litter."

The Pet Peace of Mind program, she said, will help keep that bond between an owner and his or her pet in place while they are receiving hospice care.

"It will keep the pet healthy and happy in his home with the owner," Neary said.

Neary is seeking volunteers willing to spend time with patients' dogs and cats, which she said would make for a good volunteering opportunity for children with parental supervision or high school and university students.

"I see this as a really great way for families to volunteer for Iowa City Hospice," she said.

Illustrating just how important pets are to patients and their families, Neary said Iowa City Hospice's annual Walk for Dignity often includes a number of dogs who walk with families in honor of a loved one who has been served by hospice. This year's walk is set for 1 pm. April 17 at Willow Creek Park in Iowa City.

For Gisleson, who works with other hospice patients in their homes in addition to walking the dog, it has been rewarding to help people continue to live on their own terms.

"It's nice to know you're giving someone patient care at home, and they're where they'd choose to be taken care of, instead of them wanting to get out of the hospital," she said.