

PAWS that refresh

Therapy-dog hopefuls get tryout; seniors get happy



Marty Heisey / Staff photos

Zoe, a cocker spaniel training to be a therapy dog, familiarizes herself with a walker at Mennonite Home earlier this month. Below, Rebecca

Hickey handles Biggie, a German shepherd, as it gets used to a walker during its audition at the retirement community.

BY LORI VAN INGEN
Staff Writer

Auditioning can be difficult. It helps if you're adorable and hairy — at least when you're trying out for a spot as a therapy dog.

Six therapy-dog hopefuls were put through their paces earlier this month at Mennonite Home on

Harrisburg Pike. The hounds and their handlers were "auditioning" for PALS (People Able to Lend Support) with Pets, a new program of Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield launched recently in Lancaster County and in operation in limited areas elsewhere.

PALS with Pets enables both Highmark members and nonmembers to lend support to seniors in need, said Randy Detweiler, program coordinator for the PALS program.

In addition, the volunteers receive credits for each hour of service they perform. They can redeem the credits for help with such things as grocery shopping or lawn work, Detweiler said.

The volunteers also can donate their credits to another member or, if they are Highmark members, can save the credits for their own future needs, he said.

PALS volunteers must go through rigorous screening and review processes, he said.

The screening and review are done in collaboration with Therapy Dogs International, Delta Society and Keystone Pet-Enhanced Therapy Services



PALS: *Furry friendship*



Marty Heisey / Staff

Max, a golden retriever, takes a break from training at Mennonite Home.

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(KPETS), and they take two to six weeks to complete, he said.

In this area, KPETS — a nonprofit established to promote animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities — is the partner of choice. “They go above and beyond,” Detweiler said.

The aspiring therapy dogs at the Mennonite Home session represented a variety of breeds.

They included a standard poodle, Portuguese water dog, cairn terrier, cocker spaniel, German shepherd and golden retriever.

KPETS trainers screen the dogs every second and fourth Tuesday at Mennonite Home.

“It’s not an obedience

class,” KPETS trainer Wendy McKelvy said. “We don’t expect perfect dogs. They should have a good time. We want your dog to have a positive experience.”

McKelvy said safety is the biggest concern. That’s why the handlers need to show that they can control their dogs around walkers and wheelchairs, elevators, other dogs and people, when there are loud noises and when there are items on the floor that could harm the animals.

KPETS volunteers visit such places as nursing homes, hospitals, hospices, Schreiber Pediatric Rehab Center, schools, libraries and juvenile detention centers, said Karen Gerth of KPETS. There are 200 volunteers in 10 counties, with the biggest

concentration in Lancaster and Dauphin counties.

“We match up people with their schedules and what they are comfortable doing,” Gerth said.

Meeting at Mennonite Home for the assessment sessions is a win-win, she said. It gives residents the opportunity to watch the dogs and KPETS a place to work.

“We know how wonderful pets are for our residents,” said Sue Edwards, coordinator of assisted-living activities and the therapy pool at Mennonite Home. “They are very soothing and calming. They get great responses from some people who don’t give a response of any kind. They look forward (to the pets’ visits) so much.”

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