

Pets and positive ageing

Many Australian families grow up with a pet of some kind. For most of us this is a dog or a cat, or both. Pet companionship is important at all times of life, including when we are older. For many older people, who are living alone, pet companionship is central to their welfare and their pet may be their only daily companion. Caring for a pet can be a reason for facing each day and can bring many health and social benefits.

- Di Johnstone, Secretary of Pets and Positive Ageing reports





NEWS

With the number of older Australians growing rapidly, so are the numbers of older pet owners. Around 14% of Australians are now 65 or over, but by 2061 around 22% -25% of Australians will be 65 and over, some 9-11 million people. Although pet ownership dwindles as people get older, the number of older people with pets will continue to be significant.

Keeping older pet owners and their pets together

Many older pet owners want to continue living with their pets, and to take their pets when they move to retirement villages and other aged accommodation. There are a few pet-friendly options, but the demand is growing fast. This presents a real commercial opportunity, as many older pet owners are keen to downsize, but unwilling to move without their pet.

Keeping older pet owners and pets together, where it is appropriate to do so, was the focus of a community conversation in Canberra in 2012. The conversation prompted a wide community discussion and led to the formation of Pets and Positive Ageing Inc.

This is a voluntary group with a membership which includes a major aged care operator, a community service provider, a vet, the RSPCA, a Domestic Animal Services volunteer, volunteers with dog rescue and a pets-as-therapy group.

The group's focus is on practical support for change. They produce helpful information, hold sessions with relevant speakers, distribute material produced by organisations with similar goals and encourage and support community conversations in other locations.

A flyer has been produced about pet-friendly, aged accommodation options (primarily in the ACT and NSW) and can be found on their website: www.petsandpositiveageing.com.

A comprehensive national database of pet-friendly facilities, produced by the Animal Welfare League of Australia, is also at www.petfriendlyagedcare.com.au.

On 18 June 2015, Pets and Positive Ageing Inc. presented a session in Canberra on supporting older owners, through pet bereavement. The speaker was Dr David Foote, veterinarian, lecturer, pet bereavement counsellor and Program Director, Intern Mentoring Program, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney.

As Pets and Positive Ageing Inc also focus on pet welfare, the solutions for people need to be those that are also best for their animals and to ensure the appropriate care for pets of older pet owners.

There are particular hardships for older pet owners on low incomes living at home, who are frail and ageing, when they face medical crises or emergencies. They may put off essential treatment, walk out of hospitals, or refuse to go for important operations if there is no care for their pets.

Moving from your family home soon?



Are you - or is a member of your family - moving to a retirement village, independent living unit, hostel or nursing home - and worried about being parted from a pet?

See over for information that will be helpful.

Ask if you can take your pet with you

Aged care operators are recognizing the benefits of pets, with some allowing owners to take their pets with them. There will be rules and some pets are not appropriate in some circumstances. If you have more than one pet, you could ask if you can bring more than one. You may also want to ask whether you may get another pet if your current pet passes away. Useful information about aged care accommodation that allows pets can be found in DPS guides or see contacts below.

Tell them how important your pet is to you

When making enquiries, be ready to explain the benefits owning your pet has for you. Give accurate information about your pet(s) including type, size, age, behaviour, whether desexed (vet certification is probably required) and any vaccinations.

Consider options for care

If you have to move and are unable to take your pet with you, you do not have to euthanise your pet. There are other options. Contact an animal shelter (RSPCA: 02 6287 8100) or a local rescue group (such as ARF: rehome@fosterdogs.org). They may be able to assist with rehoming advice. Alternatively, check online to find out if your breed of dog has a special rescue group.

You are not alone

If you are likely to experience the loss of a pet, or have to part with one, your vet can discuss the issues with you before this happens. If required, pet bereavement support is available from Dr David Foote, veterinarian and counsellor (0425 281 424 - fees apply) and Rev Barbara Allen, Uniting Church Australia (0439 317 924 - Mon-Fri: 9am - 5pm).

These are useful contacts for aged care organisations that offer some pet-friendly options:

- Anglicare: 1800 457 255 • BUPA Aged Care: 1300 302 350
- Calvary Retirement Community, Canberra: 02 6464 7400
- CatholicCare: St Vincent Villas (Aranda) and Aloysius Morgan Villas (Campbell): 02 61626100
- EdeninOZ: 03 8819 4732 • Freedom Aged Care: 1800 994 763
- Goodwin (Ainslie, Farrer, Monash and Crace) 02 6175 5058
- Hindmarsh: 02 6169 3669 (Bellerive); 02 6282 1782 (The Grange Deakin)
- Lend Lease Aged Care: 02 6257 8798 (Isabella Gardens)
- Murray Glen Village (Tumut): 1800 996 126
- RSL LifeCare (Linton Village and Gardiner Grove) 02 6226 1899
- Stockland Retirement Living: 1800 72 71 70
- UnitingCare Ageing (Amala Village): 02 6294 8200

Produced by Pets and Positive Ageing Inc: www.petsandpositiveageing.com
For further information contact Jan Phillips (President) on 0412 411 424



Pets and positive ageing

There are a small number of volunteer-supported, in-home, pet support programs, and the need for more such programs is growing rapidly. One excellent program in NSW is run by the RSPCA: <http://www.rspcansw.org.au/our-work/programs-community-services/pets-for-older-persons>

An especially important issue for older dog owners, is being readily able to manage their dog on their own most of the time. Older pet owners are less mobile and strong, so large, powerful dogs are generally not a good idea for an older owner. Another common problem is that families wanting to give an older relative a dog to keep them company, may choose a puppy. Puppies are cute, but can be too active and difficult for an older person to manage.

Sadly a hard-to-handle dog may end up euthanised by a vet, or at the local shelter or pound. This is a bad outcome for all: a traumatised owner, the bewildered dog and overstretched pounds and shelters around Australia. When an older person is looking for a pet, a suitably sized, well behaved older dog is sometimes a better option, than an active puppy.

To learn more about ways to help older pet owners and their pets stay together, or to join, view their website at www.petsandpositiveageing.com

Contacts:

Jan Phillips, President, Pets and Positive Ageing, 0412 411 424 or Di Johnstone AM, Secretary/Treasurer on secretary@petsandpositiveageing.com



Above: Residents at Ridgcrest, Page enjoying village life with dog companions.



Above: President, Jan Phillips (right) with friends Christine Hoystead and Dale Gartshore on a Sunday Scottie Club walk. Photo: Courtesy of Joan Skipper



Left: Vice President, Kath McQuarrie AM and her two Schnauzers: Ch Kyushu Rocketman CD (Rocky) and Ch Kyushu It's All About Hope CCD (Hope). Photo: Courtesy of Sue Hogan