

# A wagging tail can be the best medicine

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**Tracee M. Herbaugh  
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As a patient services volunteer, Conner makes his rounds at the Sunrise Senior Living complex in Westfield and stops to greet a familiar face.

What makes Conner unique is that he is a 3-year-old, short-haired collie.

He is a handsome and very well-behaved dog," said Sarah Brody, 90, who had Conner over for a visit on Friday. "He knows when I'm talking about him too, because his ears perk up. His look says a thousand words."

Conner appears to be completely comfortable in Brody's room at Sunrise, as though it were his own home. He sits patiently at Brody's feet and seems unfazed by the sounds of her oxygen machine.

Conner and his owner, Suzanne Gorda, are part of the Care Alternatives Hospice program based in Cranford, which organizes about 15 human-animal teams who visit hospice patients throughout New Jersey.

"These animals have a special instinct and presence about them," said Randie Blumhagen, the volunteer supervisor for Care Alternatives Hospice. "They tend to gravitate to the people who need them most."

Though most of the animal volunteers are dogs, Care Alternatives also uses goats and a pot-bellied pig.

"On a typical day, we come in and ask if anyone wants a visit," Gorda said. "Some people are tired, but with some we stay a long time. People love to reminisce about the time they had dogs when they see Conner."

The animals are brought in to ease the pain and provide comfort to hospice patients who may not have much time to live.

"There are a number of studies that show animals reduce blood pressure and have a calming effect," Blumhagen said. "It stimulates conversation when people see the dog. They talk about how old and how beautiful the dog is."

Blumhagen said any size or breed of dog can be used as a therapy pet. First, the pet must pass a test that measures the animal's ability to walk on a leash, tolerance of noise and comfort level around new and unfamiliar people.

"Many people are intimidated by the process of teaching their dogs to become therapy pets," Blumhagen said. "They think it requires a lot of obedience classes. But it's mostly the instinct of the animal, and that can't be taught."

To inquire about volunteer opportunities and the pet therapy program at Care Alternatives, call (866) 821-1212.

Tracee M. Herbaugh is a reporter with the New Jersey Local News Service. She may be reached at [therbaugh@njlns.com](mailto:therbaugh@njlns.com) or (908) 243-6214.



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