

SHIP for Seniors:

A new Wrinkle in Animal-Assisted Therapy

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Readers of the *Latham Letter* are well aware of the many wonderful humane education programs that introduce children to animals and the animal-assisted therapy programs that improve behaviors in humans and animals in various settings such as hospitals, juvenile detention facilities, and shelters for battered women and homeless families. Well, here's a new wrinkle for those interested in more ways people and animals can work together for their mutual benefit.

SHIP (Strategic Humane Interventions Program) for Seniors, a project of the Pryor Foundation (www.thepryorfoundation.org), teaches clicker training to members of Senior Coastsiders, the senior center in Half Moon Bay, CA, and facilitates their volunteering at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA (PHS/SPCA) to prepare shelter animals for adoption.

SHIP for Seniors benefits both human and animal participants in learning new skills and expanding opportunities. The seniors teach animals to come to the front of their cages, sit (rather than bark and jump) and look at the person in front of the cage. They also teach cats and dogs “high fives” and a couple of other endearing behaviors. Seniors using walkers and wheelchairs can do this readily and there is no risk to their safety because they do not take the animals out of their cages for training. There is a separate socialization component in which the seniors can sit to cuddle and play with animals without risk of tripping or falling.

Many members of Senior Coastsiders love animals but cannot manage to care for one at home at this stage of their lives. SHIP for Seniors gives people meaningful and enjoyable contact with



animals and allows them to contribute to the animals' prospects for a new home and better future. Additionally, they meet and develop relationships with staff and volunteers at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA, broadening their own horizons and social network.

Transportation to animal shelters, which are usually located in industrial areas far from participants' neighborhoods, is a perennial problem for programs serving children and seniors. Senior Coastsiders serves a hot lunch Monday-Friday and provides transportation to the center at noon. It also offers a ride home at 4:00 p.m. SHIP for Seniors members gather at 1:00 and form carpools so that those who don't (or shouldn't) drive have rides available. The carpools return to the senior center in time to catch the 4:00 van home.

The animals' prospects for adoption improve through SHIP for Seniors. Animals that orient to people and look friendly (and smart – all those “high fives”) get adopted while those that stay in the back of their cages and ignore visitors or bark and jump are often passed over. Additionally, the shelter is able to assess which animals would be a good fit in a home with an older person and which would not.

PHS/SPCA is a large and busy shelter. For this program to work, it must go with the shelter's flow and make minimal demands on staff and routines. Happily, the accommodations needed for our SHIP for Seniors volunteers are few and easy to make:

1. Time commitments

PHS/SPCA, like other shelters, needs reliable, committed volunteers. The shelter requires that regular volunteers make a commitment of at least a 2-hour shift per week for a full year. Seniors interested in volunteering want to be able to meet the commitments they make. They also know that illness and family obligations may make considerable and unexpected demands on their time. Thus, asking seniors to keep weekly appointments and guarantee a year of service will rule out many motivated volunteers who would otherwise give many hours of dedicated work for years. SHIP for Seniors, the sponsoring organization, commits to the schedule and allows individual members to sign up week by week as their health and schedules permit. We've found that 90 minutes twice a month is about the right length for most seniors – long enough to do a considerable amount of work, and short enough that even people with various infirmities can participate. Most seniors prefer afternoons



Scott DeLucchi and John Forbes



Senior Coastsiders Betty Count, Peg Nordensten and John Forbes

as they need more time to get ready in the morning and prefer not to return home after dark.

2. Writing

PHS/SPCA volunteers fill out applications and sign a number of informed consents. Several of our senior participants have gross and fine motor problems resulting from strokes, Parkinsonism and other problems of aging that make writing difficult. It is embarrassing for people to admit that they cannot write. Thus, letting our seniors fill out applications at home or at the senior center and mail them in spares them public discomfort.

3. Clothing

PHS/SPCA volunteers wear PHS/SPCA T-shirts as well as name tags so they are easily identified. Older people choose clothing that facilitates mobility and perhaps obscures signs of disability or injury. They may also need assistance dressing. Asking them to wear an agency T-shirt or smock is problematic if they need help putting it on and taking it off or if it compromises mobility or highlights a sore spot. Name tags suffice to identify SHIP for Seniors participants.

Like most progressive sheltering organizations, PHS/SPCA strives to be an active and contributing member of the community. PHS/SPCA always seeks both to meet the obvious demands of the animals in its care and to join with human service programs to create a more humane community for all. This partnership has allowed PHS/SPCA to enter into our new community collaboration easily because SHIP for Seniors makes no significant demands on staff time or other resources. The animals benefit from one more opportunity for compassionate contact with people while at the shelter, and the seniors experience a benefit as well. It's a true "win-win."

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Photographs by Nancy Struck and John Forbes



SHIP (Strategic Humane Interventions Program) for Seniors is a project of the Pryor Foundation (www.thepryorfoundation.org), an educational organization that promotes the study, understanding and application of marker-based shaping as a tool for influencing human and non-human animal behavior.

Senior Coastsiders, Half Moon Bay, CA (www.seniorcoastsiders.org) offers classes, lectures, events and trips, assistance with home repairs, transportation, shopping trips and meals, case management and resources on aging and caregiving.

The Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA (www.peninsulahumanesociety.org) is a full service open door shelter providing services for all animals in San Mateo county. It offers a wide array of services including wildlife rehabilitation, outreach vaccination and spay/neuter clinics, humane education and adoption programs.