



PAWSITIVE HEALING

The Role of WAGS Therapy Dogs in Pain Management and Holistic Nursing Care

E. Jean Zebroski – Clifford, CDVS, MHA
Director, Volunteer Services
06/12/2026

Department of Volunteer Services



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this presentation participants will be able to:

- Define animal-assisted interventions
- Describe physiological and psychological effects of therapy dog visits
- Review evidence supporting animal-assisted programs
- Explain the structure of the WAGS Program
- Discuss the role of therapy dogs in holistic nursing care



AUDIENCE POLL

Have you ever referred a patient for a therapy dog visit?

- Does your organization have a therapy dog program?
- Have you personally interacted with a therapy dog?



AAT vs AAA



HISTORY OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS

A Brief History

- **Florence Nightingale recognized the calming effect of companion animals**
- **Dr. Boris Levinson introduced the concept of pet-facilitated therapy**
- **Animal-assisted programs expanded throughout healthcare settings**
- **Therapy dog programs are now common in hospitals nationwide**

WHY PAIN MANAGEMENT NURSES SHOULD CARE

Pain Is More Than a Physical Experience

Pain is influenced by:

- Anxiety
- Fear
- Stress
- Loneliness
- Depression
- Hospitalization



PAIN IS MORE THAN PHYSICAL

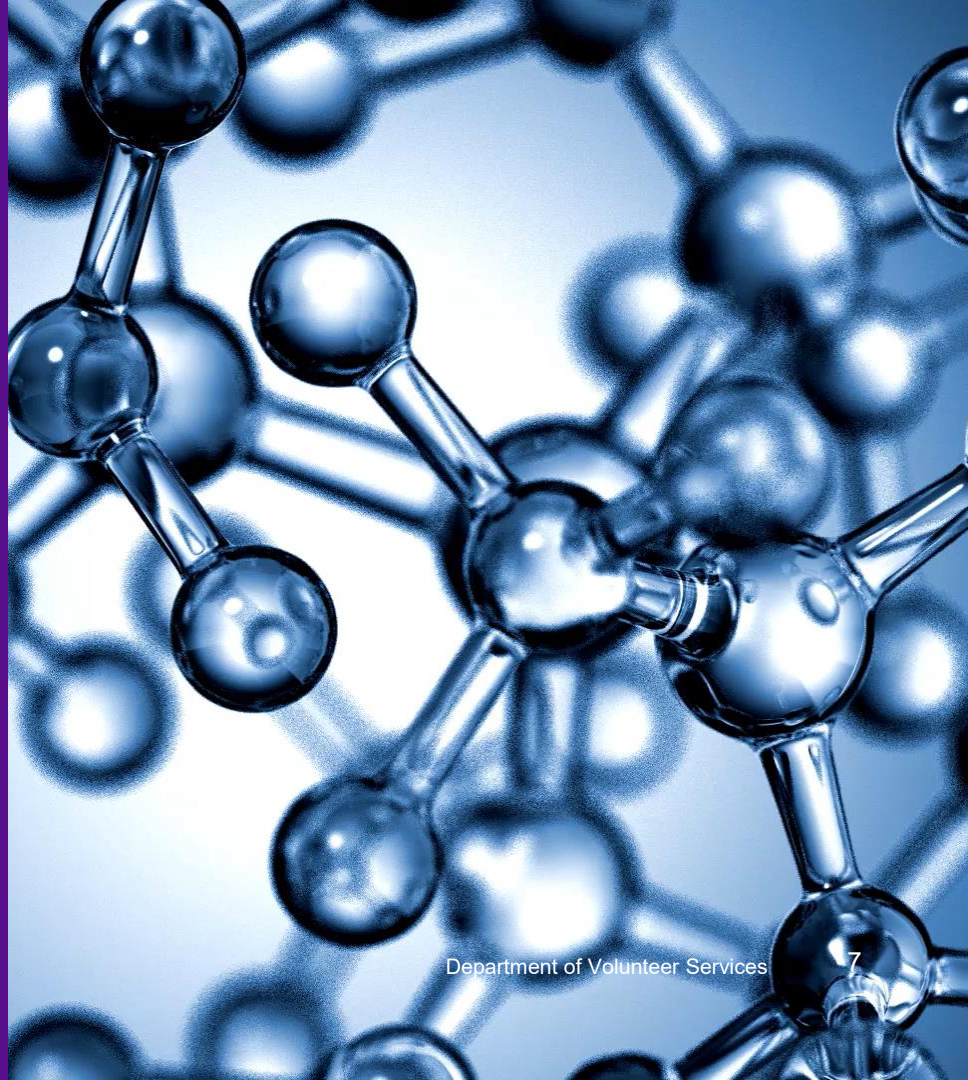
The Biopsychosocial Model

Physical Factors

Psychological Factors

Social Factors

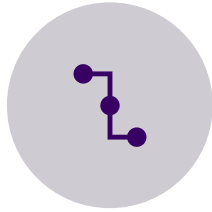
Together these influence the pain experience.



The Human – Animal Bond



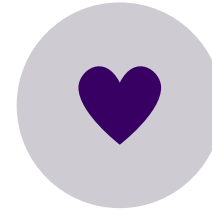
COMFORT



CONNECTION



TRUST



EMOTIONAL
SUPPORT

PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS

↓ **Cortisol (Stress Hormone)**

↓ **Blood Pressure**

↓ **Heart Rate**

↑ **Oxytocin**

↑ **Endorphins**

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Emotional Benefits

- Reduced anxiety
- Improved mood
- Increased relaxation
- Emotional comfort

Behavioral Benefits

- Increased engagement
- Positive distraction
- Social interaction
- Improved patient experience

THE PAIN- ANXIETY CYCLE

Pain



Anxiety



Stress



Increased Pain Perception



More Anxiety



HOW THERAPY DOGS SUPPORT PAIN MANAGEMENT

Supporting Patients Through:

- Positive distraction
- Stress reduction
- Relaxation
- Emotional support
- Social engagement
- Coping assistance

Numeric Rating Scale



Wong-Baker FACES® Pain Rating Scale



©1983 Wong-Baker FACES Foundation. www.WongBakerFACES.org
Used with permission.

EVIDENCE & LITERATURE REVIEW



WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE TELL US

Psychological Benefits

- Reduced anxiety
- Improved mood
- Positive distraction
- Emotional comfort

Physiological Benefits

- Lower cortisol
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced heart rate
- Increased oxytocin

CUMMINS & WILSON

The Holistic Effects of Interacting with Animals

- Emotional support
- Stress reduction
- Enhanced well-being
- Social connection



PHYSIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

Hormonal Effects

- Oxytocin
- Endorphins

Stress Reduction

- Cortisol decrease
- Relaxation response

PAUSE FOR PAWS

Benefits Identified

- Reduced stress
- Enhanced wellness
- Improved patient experience
- Staff support

PAWSITIVE HEALING

Impact on Inpatient Geriatric Care

- Reduced loneliness
- Improved mood
- Increased engagement
- Positive patient experience

HOLISTIC NURSING CARE

Body
Mind
Spirit

Therapy Dogs Support All Three



NON- PHARMACOLOGIC PAIN MANAGEMENT

Guided imagery

- Relaxation
- Music therapy
- Aromatherapy
- Pet therapy



INTRODUCING WAGS

WAGS

Whatever Ails You
Gets Support



Oliver Essner

VOLUNTEER
Volunteer Services



Department of Volunteer Services

21

NYU LANGONE HOSPITAL—LONG ISLAND

WAGS: OUR STORY

WAGS Program
Timeline

2019
Program officially
launches at NYU
Winthrop Hospital

2020–2022
Growth throughout
hospital units

2023–2025
Expanded visibility
and participation

Today
More than 15,000
interactions with
patients, families,
visitors, and staff

WHY NYU SUPPORTS WAGS

Staff Benefits

- Stress reduction
- Wellness
- Morale

Patient Benefits

- Reduced anxiety
- Emotional support
- Improved experience

WAGS PROGRAM GOVERNANCE



VOLUNTEER
SERVICES
DEPARTMENT



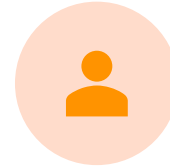
↓
NURSING
LEADERSHIP



↓
INFECTION
PREVENTION



↓
RISK
MANAGEMENT



↓
ADMINISTRATION

WHY POLICY MATTERS

Policies Promote:

- Safety
- Consistency
- Compliance
- Sustainability
- Trust



WAGS POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

Eligibility

- Patient consent
- Clinical appropriateness

Exclusions

- Isolation precautions
- Severe allergies
- Fear of dogs



WAGS Policy Highlights



Eligible

- ✓ Patient consents
- ✓ Clinically appropriate
- ✓ No contraindications

Not Appropriate

- X Isolation precautions
- X Severe allergies
- X Fear of dogs
- X Clinical restrictions

THERAPY DOG REQUIREMENTS



Dog Requirements

- Health clearance
- Vaccinations
- Temperament evaluation

Handler Requirements

- Training
- Certification
- Hospital orientation

INFECTION PREVENTION



BEFORE VISIT
→ DURING VISIT
→ AFTER VISIT



HAND / PAW
HYGIENE
THROUGHOUT

JOINT COMMISSION GUIDANCE

Recommended Practices

- Written policies
- Animal health standards
- Infection prevention
- Staff education
- Program oversight



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

Key Considerations

- Patient safety
- Animal screening
- Staff education
- Monitoring
- Compliance



**Department
of Health**

MEET SHARON & OLIVER



Oliver's Story

Certified at age 2

Originally intended for pediatric dental patients

Joined WAGS during program development

Now THE most recognized WAGS teams

From Dental Office Comfort Dog to Hospital Ambassador



**Pet Partners
Certified Team**



**WAGS Volunteers
for 7+ Years**



**Over 15,000
Interactions Since
Program Launch**

Therapy Dog Requirements

Pet Partners Certification

- 🐾 Veterinary Clearance
- 🐾 Vaccinations
- 🐾 Temperament Testing
- 🐾 Handler Training
- 🐾 Hospital Orientation



Pet Partners
Touching Lives, Improving Health

How a WAGS Visit Happens

Referral



Volunteer Services



Handler Assignment



Patient Visit



Follow-Up



What Patients Tell Us

"This made my day."

"I forgot about my pain."

"He reminds me of my dog at home."

"I haven't smiled like this in days."

PATIENT STORY



Why Staff Love WAGS

There is nothing like the unconditional love of a dog.



WAGS By The Numbers

15,000+

Patient, Family, Visitor & Staff Interactions



Future of WAGS



- ✓ Expanded access
- ✓ Additional therapy dog teams
- ✓ Staff wellness initiatives
- ✓ Research opportunities

Key Takeaways

- Pain is multidimensional
- Therapy dogs support holistic care
- Evidence supports meaningful benefits
- WAGS is structured and safe
- Nurses are essential partners



Thank You



Q&A

E. Jean Zebroski – Clifford, CDVS, MHA
Director, Volunteer Services

NYU Langone Health
NYU Langone Hospital—Long Island
259 First Street
Mineola, New York 11501
T 516-663-9440
M 516-477-6983
F 516-663-9301
Jean.Zebroski-Clifford@nyulangone.org

