
STAR Dogs Help Public Safety Heroes Relieve Stress in South Florida

By Debi Fischer, BA, RN, AS

Ever think of you four-footed friend as a stress buster?

Officials at the Humane Society of Broward County, Florida, and the Broward County (FL) Sheriff's Office have, and they are putting the theory in practice by helping firefighters, EMTs and paramedics combat stress.

Their weapon of choice is the Support Through Animal Relationships (STAR) program.

According to Marni Bellavia, education partnership coordinator at the Humane Society of Broward County, to date, 14 dogs had been paired with an equal number of fire stations through the STAR program, which celebrates its 1-year anniversary this December.

Once a month, the dogs visit the fire stations, where they help public safety heroes lower their stress levels and anxiety inherent to their job, which in turn helps them to fight high blood pressure and keep their cholesterol levels in check.

Numerous studies involving adults and children alike indicate that petting a dog can not only relieve stress, but also prevent it, which is one of the primary goals of the STAR program in Broward County.

The use of companion and therapy dogs to relieve human stress and anxiety has been championed for decades by organizations such as The Delta Society, which has more than 6400 Pet Partners teams offering comfort in the form of a wagging tail to people in need all around the country.

RNs in south Florida can follow the lead of the STAR program by contacting the Broward County Humane Society to ask about setting up similar programs in their respective hospital departments.

Staff and patients alike could benefit from regular visits by STAR dogs in high stress areas like heavily trafficked emergency departments and oncology units where patients can develop much anxiety during lengthy hospital stays.

Similarly, rehabilitation units, though not normally considered high-stress areas, have their own pressures to contend with. People learning to walk, talk and swallow all over again are going through their own types of stress and might benefit a great deal from a visit by STAR dogs. Not to mention the RNs working on those units.

For more information about the STAR program online, visit the Humane Society of Broward County's Web site at www.browardhumane.com or call 954-989-3977.

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