



MS-PAWS: A SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WITH MS AND THEIR COMPANION ANIMALS

**Patricia A. Bednarik, MS, CCC-SLP, MSCS
Joanne B. Moore, MA
Anne C. Mageras, BSW
Jerry Hogenmiller, Esq.**

Consortium of MS Centers
718 Teaneck Road, Teaneck, NJ 07666
Tel: (201) 837-0727 Fax: (201) 837-9414
Email: info@mscare.org Website: <http://www.mscare.org> Federal ID # 22-3216416



TROUBLING ISSUES

The ambulance was in the driveway and the person with MS was refusing to leave his home. There was no one to care for his cat and dog. If left alone, the pets would surely perish.

The physician was reluctant to discharge the elderly patient from the hospital, as she was not yet safe to return home. The patient was becoming increasingly anxious and depressed. Neighbors had reported that, in the woman's absence, her cat of sixteen years had stopped eating.

A call had come in to the local chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. A woman with MS, her spouse and her family had recently moved into federally subsidized housing. Now, they were facing an eviction warning. The woman's dog was over the allowable twenty-pound weight limit and attempts to place the dog with family members or friends were unsuccessful. The local animal shelter was overcrowded and, at six years of age, the dog would most likely be euthanized once at the shelter. Could the NMSS help in any way?

ABSTRACT

Pets are a vital part of the lives of many people living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The possibility of inadequate care of, loss of, or unwarranted euthanasia of a companion animal has caused people with MS to avoid necessary hospitalization for care of medical needs related to or independent from MS. We have developed a program to educate people with MS about these potential needs and meet these needs when necessary. We describe aspects of this program with special attention to practical and legal issues. This program is known as MS-PAWS (Pets Are Wonderful Support) and is patterned after similar programs that assist people who are living with HIV infection. Many people with MS have pets who enhance their quality of life. Most people have friends or family who can assist with care of their pets when the need arises, however a significant number of people have support systems that are inadequate or cannot accept responsibility for care of a pet. The likelihood of loss of the pet, suffering of the pet, or damage to the individual from postponed or missed medical care is great in these circumstances. Our program educates the pet owning MS community to plan ahead and provides assistance to those in need. Restrictions on program availability include only that the pet owners have MS, reside in our NMSS chapter area, require medical treatment (not vacation boarding), have exhausted other avenues, and be recommended by a health care or social service provider. Duties of the pet owner include registration (signing a contract and release, providing a vaccination record) and remaining in contact with the program during their illness. Emergency assistance is available and the program is free. Program information has been disseminated by the local NMSS. A local animal shelter provides shelter service or foster home care.

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PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP

Allegheny District Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society

The National MS Society is the only national voluntary MS organization that meets the standards of all major agencies that rate nonprofit groups. The Society supports more MS research and serves more people with MS than any national voluntary MS organization in the world. Through its 50-state network of chapters, the Society funds research, furthers education, advocates for people with disabilities and provides a variety of empowering programs for Americans who have MS and their families. The Allegheny District Chapter serves 23 counties in Western PA. Services include: Home-based gynecologist program, Medical equipment assistance, Respite program, Information and referral, Newly diagnosed support, Lending library, Medical support, Self-help groups, Peer support, Wellness programs, Advocacy, Fundraising and Kids Konnect.

Animal Friends, Inc.

Founded in 1943, Animal Friends is Pittsburgh's only full-service No-Kill Shelter. Animal Friends provides temporary care for homeless, unwanted and abused animals without the threat of unwarranted euthanasia. Animal Friends programs and services include: Adoption and placement services, Animal Birth Control spay/neuter program, Cruelty investigations, Humane education, Foster care, Pet assisted therapy, Golden Age Retrievers program, Obedience training and Volunteer opportunities. The vision of Animal Friends is to guarantee loving, responsible homes for all of Pittsburgh's dogs and cats.

The Allegheny District Chapter of the NMSS and Animal Friends, Inc. recognize the important relationship our companion animals have in our daily lives. During times of crisis – our companion animals can be an important lifeline, providing comfort and unconditional love.

ELIGIBILITY

People who are eligible for the MS-PAWS Program must meet the following criteria:

- Are pet owners who have a confirmed diagnosis of MS
- Reside in the geographic region served by the Allegheny District Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society
- Require emergency pet support services due to medical and/or other personal emergency situations (Not for vacation boarding, routine pet-sitting, or other non-emergency situations)
- Have exhausted all other possible avenues for pet care
- Are referred by a health care or social service provider

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The local participating no-kill shelter, Animal Friends, reserves the right to review each case on an individual basis and manages the MS-PAWS Program.

Exotic animals (snakes, rare birds, etc.) and other domestic animals (rabbits, ferrets, etc.) may be considered. Non-traditional domestic animals (big cats, wolves, etc.) are not eligible.

LENGTH OF CARE

The length of temporary care is determined on a case-by-case basis. The person with MS or a designated representative will maintain contact with Animal Friends throughout the period of emergency. Procedures are stipulated in the contract in the event the pet owner or designated representative fails to maintain contact with Animal Friends.

INTAKE PROCEDURES

Dissemination of information is through the local NMSS chapter by way of the quarterly newsletters, brochures at affiliated MS clinics, special events and during educational talks given to local support groups.

The person with MS, designated representative, health care provider or social service contact notifies the Outreach Program Director at Animal Friends and states emergency pet support is needed. Appropriate paper work is then completed:

1. MS-PAWS/Animal Friends Contract
2. Authorization For Release of Information (Veterinary)
3. Animal Registration Sheet

Animal Friends will, at its discretion, take custody of the pet and keep it at the shelter, find temporary foster care with a qualified volunteer or make other arrangements with an Animal Friends designated kennel or veterinary facility as it deems appropriate.

Pre-registration for this program is suggested but not mandatory.

FEE

Animal Friends is able to provide this temporary foster care free of charge. Emergency treatment or other medical conditions that may arise while the pet is in the custody of Animal Friends is at owner expense. Fee adjustments can be accommodated depending on the individual's financial circumstances.

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***LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Assistance from a qualified attorney is recommended for development of a program such as this. Potential problem areas are:

- Personal and organization liability
- Patient confidentiality and disclosure issues
- Forfeiture of pet issues
- Animal abuse/neglect
- Domestic violence/neglect
- Criminal activities (drug dealing, etc.)
- Animal custody issues
- Injuries to or from pets while in foster care

*Obviously, this list is not all-inclusive.

SUMMARY

- The human-animal bond has positive effects upon health and quality of life.
- Some people with MS will require assistance with the care of their companion animals at times of illness or emergency.
- There are numerous challenges to providing a support service in times of crisis.
- Local animal shelters or other humane agencies can be a source of support.

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Contacts

Patricia A. Bednarik, M.S., CCC-SLP, MSCS
K9mom4rsq@comcast.net

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jmoore@animal-friends.org

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