

Vet Social Work Program Counsels Pet Owners, Staff

Contributed by Laura Min Mercer

A new program strictly for humans is now available at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital—Michigan State University Veterinary Social Work Services—the first of its kind in Michigan.

Dedicated exclusively to veterinary social work, the program offers counseling services for pet owners, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and other staff.

“We provide crisis counseling for pet owners whose pets have serious medical conditions or who are facing grief from pet loss,” explains Amanda Morgan, a master’s student in social work and intern in the program.

The program is led by Linda Lawrence, clinical instructor and undergraduate adviser in the School of Social Work, who oversees Morgan and Marilyn Somoza, another master’s student in social work and intern.

The program’s primary goals are to alleviate crisis situations of pet owners and provide support for veterinary staff members. While some pet owners have begun to seek counseling services, many are first contacted informally while waiting for their pet’s appointment or services to be completed.

“Radiation clients are here four to five days a week for up to four weeks,” says Lawrence. “We have time to build a supportive relationship. Oncology patients and their owners are here for regular appointments for an extended period of time and are wonderful support for each other.”

“Losing a pet is a traumatic experience,” says Lawrence. “A pet is a member of the family, and those who do not own pets often do not understand the human-animal bond that is formed between pet owner and pet. When a pet passes away, owners experience grief, sometimes lasting months.”

“We are here to normalize people’s grief over losing a pet. Socially, people are often told to ‘get over’ losing a pet and that the pet is ‘just a dog’ or ‘just a cat,’” says Morgan.

Somoza says, “Explaining to owners that what they feel is normal helps people understand their feelings.”

Cat owner Elaine Muscat said her experiences with Lawrence as a source of support and compassion were exceptional. Muscat’s cat, Jasper, was diagnosed with cancer in 2004. Through the support of Muscat’s family and the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Jasper’s life was extended for about two more years.

Meanwhile, as Jasper was receiving treatments, Muscat’s father passed away. At that time, Lawrence began meeting with Muscat, who traveled from the Detroit area, on a regular basis.

“Linda made sure Jasper’s appointments were always on Mondays at 10 a.m., and she was available to have coffee and speak with me,” says Muscat. “It was wonderful therapy for me while Jasper received high-quality treatment from doctors and staff at the hospital.”

The social work program is planning to start a pet loss support group and a veterinary technician support group. Research has shown that veterinary staff members often experience “compassion fatigue” or a form of stress resulting in caring and working with others who are suffering. The support group will help veterinary technicians work through their feelings and learn coping skills.

The program is currently funded by the School of Social Work and the Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

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More information about pet loss is available at <http://cvm.msu.edu/petloss/index.htm>