



Volunteer Della, with her partner pooch Rosie, visit residents of Betel in Selkirk.

Therapy dogs are back, thanks in part to SDCF grant

Deadline to apply for WCGL fund, Community Grant program Feb. 28

There's likely stacks of statistical data that detail the chemical reaction in the brain when a human hand comes into contact with a dog's fur, and while the scientific research has its value, all the proof you really need is a grin and a wag.

Thanks to a Selkirk & District Community Foundation grant that the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program (SJATD) applied for last fall, they're back in Selkirk and adding more locations for volunteers and dogs to visit. The Foundation is accepting spring grant applications now until Feb. 28.

Ruth Howard, Director of Community Services at St. John Ambulance, says the program was impacted by COVID and is now in a rebuilding period. Some of their previous volunteers aren't able to return to the program now, due to things like their dogs aging out or passing away.

"The grant from the Community Foundation is a huge benefit to us. Prior to the pandemic we were visiting a number of facilities in the Selkirk area and unfortunately we weren't able to continue...because of social distancing requirements," Howard said.

"This grant will help us to rebuild our presence in the community so that we can service not only Betel Home, but others too. We can return to the facilities we serviced before and bring on new ones."

Increasing the dog program helps with the mental health of people of all ages, especially seniors, who can suffer from loneliness and isolation as they age. The Foundation's Vital Signs Report says there's a shortage of community mental health services in the region.

Bev Clegg, Executive Director of the SDCF, says playing a role in improving mental health services in the region is a response to Vital Signs findings.

"Bringing the dogs and their volunteer partners back into facilities in the community is important. It might be a small gesture, just a visit from a dog, but the impact is so huge for people's mental health it can't really be measured. We're thrilled to be a part of this success story," Clegg said.

The SJATD program is extremely popular and it's beneficial to not just patients or residents in care homes, but staff, the volunteers and the dog as well.

"We talk a lot about our visits benefitting the patients but it also benefits the staff that work in these facilities because they see the positive outlook that it brings to the people they're caring for. It also benefits them because they get to sneak in a little visit every once in a while," Howard said.

"And it benefits the volunteers, they're sharing the love of their dog, who is like a family member to them, with others. We know dogs give unconditional support and love."

Volunteer Della and her dog Rosie have been visiting Betel Home residents and Howard says they've developed deep relationships with the people there.

“Della visits every week on Friday and she says that the residents have told her that Friday afternoons are the best part of their week, because they know that Della and Rosie are coming to see them,” Howard said.

Clegg says that kind of response to a program funded through the Foundation is what it’s all about.

“At the Foundation we really live for those heartwarming stories about people’s lives being touched by something our grants have helped with,” Clegg said.

Howard says they’re thankful to the SDCF’s support of the SJATD program and their efforts to expand the number of teams in the area.

“We visit people of all ages and in all kinds of facilities with our Therapy Dog Program but it’s especially important for people in hospitals or care homes where they may not have a lot of activity to fill their time,” Howard said.

“It provides them a social outlet, to help with their mental health, their morale, give them another person they can form a social connection with.

“Some residents might not have any family nearby that can come and visit them so it’s a really good outlet for them.”

The SDCF is accepting grant applications for the Western Canada Games Legacy Fund and the Community Grant program now, with the deadline to apply being Feb 28. Grant applications have moved solely online. Go to sdca.ca for an application. Call 204-785-9755 or email selkirkfoundation@shaw.ca for more information.

Applications are also being accepted for the Government of Canada’s Community Services Recovery Fund through the Community Foundations of Canada. The fund supports a broad and diverse range of charities and non-profits. For more information go to www.communityservicesrecoveryfund.ca.

The Selkirk & District Community Foundation is a charitable organization that provides financial support to charitable causes and agencies in the region, which includes Selkirk, St. Andrews and St. Clements. Gifts from donors enable the Foundation to support countless groups and individuals in our community. The Foundation has given in excess of \$4 million to more than 125 local charities and community organizations during its 27+ years. For more details contact SDCF Executive Director Bev Clegg at 204.785.9755.