

Legislative Testimony

In Support of Bill #6465 – An Act Concerning Animal Assisted Therapy

Respectfully submitted by Kate Nicoll, LCSW, Founder: Soul Friends : AAT Programs of Connecticut

Sandy Hook taught us that animal assisted therapy works. The benefits of the human-animal bond can comfort children and families and first responders at the time of an unthinkable tragedy. Animals simply know what to do then when we are feeling powerless and overwhelmed.

Within a few hours of the Sandy Hook tragedy, Soul Friends staff contacted 211 to alert them to our state's only trained crisis response animal therapy team. We were thankful for the support from out of state teams, but Connecticut's own crisis response team only responded to the needs of Newtown two weeks after the event. In state we had listing of hundreds of teams willing to volunteer their time – some who responded had only a few months of volunteer training. Hundreds of the teams had a complex rating, recognized by the Delta Society Pet Partners program, a national registry of animal assisted therapy teams. Attempts to organize visitation for volunteers first for those with the complex rating never came to fruition. Many wonderful people were on the ground volunteering with their therapy animals and did good things for those in need. For future events it would be most beneficial to have a volunteer crisis response therapy dog teams as part of the own state's first responder team .

How does animal assisted therapy work? Who does it help? And How? And How well are our teams trained? These are the questions of results based accountability – and our in state resources in animal assisted therapy have the answers. There are more than 6 in-state agencies providing animal assisted therapy and activities with our state's children. At Soul Friends, we have had a team of 8 mental health clinicians providing animal assisted therapy for almost ten years serving over 5,700 children, at least 50% under the care of the Department of Children and Families. These are often the children who have not responded to traditional mental health therapy, but with the help of canine assisted or equine assisted therapy partner, the children share their innermost thoughts like : “Bear loves me, so I must be a good boy” from a boy with multiple foster care placements. “ I’m a better canine friend than a human friend” from a teen living with Asperger’s. “Ned calms me down” from the teenage girl with a history of explosiveness.

It is time for Connecticut to recognize its' own expertise in the human-animal bond and its ability to heal our children. We have been ahead of the curve in practice Five years ago, Soul Friends staff contacted the DCF review board to explore a treatment modality that could utilize AAT for children who witnessed or perpetrated animal abuse – the study was rejected for concern there wasn't enough numbers of children. The Department of Children and Families needs more training in the human-animal bond – we could have been a leader here in the careful integration of AAT for children who abuse animal as a way to improve empathy. A recent study in Spain explored the positive impact of a dog's eye contact for children living with autism. At Soul Friends, eight years ago we presented at an International Conference on Autism on how interaction with a therapy dog increased both eye contact

Over
→

for children with special needs, as well as demonstrated an increased sense of body awareness for children during social interactions. A recent study from the American Humane Association, is exploring the effectiveness of canine assisted therapy for children living with cancer. Ten years, Soul Friends staff contacted a Pediatric Oncologist at large teaching hospital to explore the impact of therapy dog visitation on the blood pressure readings of children living with cancer – At the first regional New England Animal Assisted Therapy Resource group at Boston Children’s Hospital, two of the presenters on the cutting edge of the field were from Connecticut. One clinician was ahead of the field in the development of policies in how to integrate animals into clinical work, one clinician ahead of the field in the gathering outcome measures.

The point is animal assisted therapy produces positive outcomes for children in need – and our state has many of our own experts in the field of human-animal studies, as well as hundreds of volunteer therapy animal teams ready to work to support, and to provide comfort to our own children. I strongly support the components of the bill that requests for the Department of Children and Families, the Governor’s Partnership on Prevention and the Department of Agriculture – to recognize and gain support from our in state experts in the field and as our mission at Soul Friends states “to heal the hearts of children one wagging tail at a time”.

*Patricia A. Sullivan
203 514 6711
www.soulfriendsinc.com*