



## Furry 'doctors' help people with all types of ailments

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NEW ORLEANS (WWL/CBS) - For 25 years, a group of volunteers has been using a method normally prohibited by hospitals to care for people who are too sick to receive care at home.

Since 1987, the visiting pet program has been changing lives of children in hospitals and the elderly in nursing homes and senior centers.

A group with dogs, cats, guinea pigs and rabbits uses cuteness in stethoscopes to heal their patients.

"Most of the patients know Olive. They don't know me, but they know Olive," owner Mike Azzarello laughingly said of his therapy pet.

Studies show petting a dog can decrease stress hormones, regulate breathing and lower blood pressure. It releases oxytocin, the hormone that bonds couples, similar to a mother and child after birth and breast-feeding. Dogs are also xenophilic, meaning they usually love strangers, and unlike humans their affection comes without expectations and judgment.

Years ago the visiting pet program went to a hospital to visit a little girl who was in a coma. She had been hit by a car when they took her hand and let her feel the animal's fur. After that she began to speak and come out of a coma.

"Wonderful, I love them," said John Hainkel Rehab Center resident Weldon Mischenich. "It raises my spirits. I had two dogs. I had a boxer and a basset hound. His name was Burlap."

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