

November, 2015  
**PILOT STUDY**



AAI & Wellness Project

Saskatoon Health Region

**Calder Centre, Residential Addictions Treatment  
 St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program**

**Background & Purpose**

**Animal Assisted Activities** (AAA) “provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance the quality of life [of humans]. AAAs are delivered in a variety of environments by specially-trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers in association with animals that meet specific criteria. Key features include absence of specific treatment goals; volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes; visit content is spontaneous” (Delta Society, n.d., as cited in Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23)

A 2014 review of studies identified an increasing empirical base for AAAs, and the need for further research (Borrego et al., 2014).

*This fact sheet shares the history and findings of a pilot study of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program at the Saskatoon Health Region, Calder Centre Residential Addictions Treatment Program, for Youth and Adults.*

The objectives of the SK St. John Ambulance (StJA) Therapy Dog program are to offer: (1) love and (2) support to the individuals with whom the

dogs and handlers visit (St. John Ambulance, 2015).

As part of a multi-site project, the aim of this pilot study is to identify the outcomes/effects of the AAA Program during the Therapy Dog team visits. Both individual and group visits were held.

The concepts of love and support are examined for if and how clients experience them, and key outcomes from past studies are measured (e.g., stress, anxiety, happiness, participation). Feedback is collected from clients, observers (e.g., counsellors), and the therapy dog handlers.

**Calder Centre Canine Assisted Activity Program**

A variety of therapeutic approaches and philosophies support Calder Centre’s service delivery. The StJA Therapy Dog program started at the Centre in 2013 with the youth stabilization (12-18yrs, 2 week), youth residential (12-18yrs, 4 week), and adult residential (18 and over, 4 week) programs participating. Prior to this, staff brought their dogs periodically to work because of the comfort they saw them offer clients during times of emotional stress.

Calder Centre made a decision in 2013 to formalize its program. In doing so it followed the Saskatoon Health Region Infection Prevention and Control Policy (SO-30), Mental Health & Addiction Services Pet Visit & Pet Therapy protocol, and secured client consent. In addition to the visiting StJA Therapy Dogs, the Centre has a staff member (who is also a StJA handler) participating on the Saskatoon Health Region Pet Therapy Committee, and this same staff completed the

Harcum College, Animal Assisted Therapy & Animal Assisted Activities Certificate Course. The Centre is working with Allison Bokitch of the Heartland Health Region to register their psychologist’s (Dr. Gerald Block) dog with Therapy Dogs International for application in his counselling practice. The Centre’s Recreational Therapist is also exploring linkages with community organizations to expose clients to animals (e.g., attending the Saskatoon Forestry Farm, dog/cat shows).

Volunteer Handler	Dog Name	Dog Breed	Dog Age	Dog Years Worked	Dog Work schedule
Cathy Anderson	Piper	Lab	8	1	Youth and adult Group and Individual
Steve Dawe	Roger	Weimaraner	7	6 months	Youth and adult Group
Colleen Dell	Subie	Boxer	5	2 years	Youth and adult Group and Individual
Colleen Dell	Kisbey	Boxer	7	2 years	Youth and adult Group and Individual
Colleen Dell	Anna-Belle	Bulldog	3	2 years	Youth and adult Group and Individual



## Research Methods

This pilot study was designed on a limited scale to gain preliminary insight into the outcomes of the StJA Therapy Dog Program at the Calder Centre and develop a future robust study.

The data collection was two-fold via a questionnaire. Qualitative, open-ended inquiry documented participant, staff, handler, and observers' subjective experiences, meanings, and processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This approach recognizes that others' perspectives lend to the co-creation of individuals' stories such that they can collaboratively unfold (i.e., clients and handlers) (Creswell, 2013). Quantitative, Likert scales documented outcomes in literature identified areas.

The data was collected from June 2014 to January 2015. A total of 161 client (63 adult and 98 youth), 59 staff (18 overnight, 41 day staff), 37 handler (representing 3 handlers and 5 dogs), and 7 observer questionnaires were completed. Five Therapy Dogs were involved in the data collection: Anna-Belle (6), Kisbey (5), Piper (23), Roger (37), Subie (29), & unknown (61). Individual visits with clients were approx. 15 minutes, and group visits averaged 25 minutes.

## Partnership & Ethics

The StJA Therapy Dog program was initiated at the Calder Centre by the University of Saskatchewan Research Chair in Substance Abuse visiting with her StJA Therapy Dog on a trial basis. This expanded to two other Therapy Dog teams visiting during the study phase, and two of the three teams continue to visit today. Individual sessions were held by two of the handlers on each visit, with either an adult or youth client that was identified by staff that day to be

The clients were presented with a questionnaire at the completion of each visit, and filled it in on-site and out of the presence the Therapy Dog team. Staff, handlers, and observers completed questionnaires immediately after the session. Overnight staff completed the questionnaire the following morning.

The client demographics are:

Gender	Male	74	46%
	Female	83	52%
	Other or Unknown	4	2%
Ethnicity	Aboriginal	67	42%
	Caucasian	86	53%
	Other or Unknown	8	5%
Age	Youth (12-18)	98	61%
	Adult (over 18)	63	39%

The handler demographics are:

Gender	Male	1	33%
	Female	2	67%
Years Volunteering for the StJA Therapy Dog program	Average	1.5	

experiencing stress, and group visits were held on the youth stabilization and residential units and the adult residential unit by all Therapy Dog teams. Visits took place 1-2 times per week.

The Saskatoon Health Region provided operational approval for this study, ethics exemption was granted from the University of Saskatchewan Human Research Ethics Board given the project's evaluative focus, and an ethics certificate was granted from the U of S Animal Re-

## Data Analysis

The data collected using the Likert scale were analyzed quantitatively for descriptive statistics (i.e., mean and frequency). Means and frequencies were compared to provide an indication of highest means and largest proportion of agreement on items. T-test mean comparisons were conducted on how a client felt before and after spending time with the Therapy Dog.

The qualitative data was analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis. Such an analysis seeks to identify recurrent patterns, or themes, in textual data. These themes were compared with others and clustered based on similarity in meaning (Saldana, 2010). The frequencies presented here may not sum to the sample size because sentences can be thematically coded more than once. All data was reviewed and interpreted by our multi-disciplinary team.

The youth data from the stabilization and residential units are combined.



search Ethics Board and adhered to the Canadian Council on Animal care guidelines for humane animal use.

The findings of this Fact Sheet *cannot* be directly compared to the findings of other AAI programs because each has clients with different presenting needs, the therapeutic approach may be dissimilar, and, in some cases, the species varies (e.g., horses are prey animals and dogs are not).

## Becoming a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog

The StJA Therapy Dog program started in Saskatchewan in 2007, with over 140 current Therapy Dog teams. The handler must be 18 years of age or older; physically and mentally capable of performing the activities that are reasonable for the type of service they are providing; willing to complete an application process and Criminal Record Check; able to successfully participate in a dog evalua-

tion; and able to provide up-to-date veterinarian documents indicating that all vaccinations are current.

The dog must be accepting of a friendly stranger; sit calm for petting; walk on a loose leash; walk through a crowd; sit on command/stay in place; and react well to another dog or to distractions (St. John Ambulance, 2015).

A team commits to volunteering at least once a month and annually provides a veterinary record of vaccinations and any behaviour-related issues with the dog. The handlers sign an annual attestation form to verify their Criminal Record Check and provide an updated Check every three years. Visit [www.sja.ca](http://www.sja.ca) for more information.

# Findings

## Client: Rated Items

The 98 youth clients and 63 adult clients were asked to rate ten items. All items except for one adult item used a 5-point Likert scale ('Not at all' to 'Yes, a lot' OR Smiley/Sad Faces). The first "Glad met with Therapy dog" item in the adult questionnaire had three options ('Yes', 'No', 'Unsure').

In response to whether they were glad they met (adult) or liked spending time (youth) with the Therapy Dog, 83% responded "Yes" or 'Yes, a lot' and 11% responded "Yes, a little" with an overall average of 4.7.

About time spent with the Therapy Dog, both adults and youth gave a high rating to receiving support from the dog handler; 65% of adults and 86% of youth rated 'Yes, a lot' with an average of 4.7.

1='Not at all'/'No'	Youth	Adult	All
5='Yes, a lot'/'Yes'	Average	Average	Average
Glad met/like spending time	4.6	4.9	4.7
Helped de-stress	4.7	4.3	4.6
Dog loves me or comforted/loved by dog	4.1	4.4	4.2
Dog handler was nice to/supported me	4.8	4.5	4.7

After spending time with the Therapy Dog, youth and adults rated feeling calm highly (4.3), with a large majority (87%) responding 'Yes, a lot' or 'Yes, a little'.

1='Not at all'/'No'	Youth	Adult	All
5='Yes, a lot'/'Yes'	Average	Average	Average
Feeling anxious	2.1	2.0	2.0
Feeling calm	4.4	4.2	4.3
In better control of feelings	3.8	4.0	3.9
Stressed	1.6	1.7	1.6

On average youth rated their feelings as one happy face higher after spending time with the Therapy Dog (3.5 to 4.5). The adult rating, on average, increased almost two faces (3.1 to 4.7). Both are significantly higher after time with the Therapy Dog ( $p < .001$ ).

1='Very Sad Face' to 5='Very Happy Face'	Youth	Adult	All
Average	Average	Average	Average
How felt before time with the dog	3.5	3.1	3.3
How felt after time with the dog	4.5	4.7	4.6



## Client: Qualitative

**Question:** What was your reason for meeting with the Therapy Dog today?

**Who responded:** Adult only, 58 of 64 (90%)  
**Themed frequency:**  
 1. Around/by chance (17, 29%) 2. Love dogs (14, 24%) 3. Enjoyment (10, 17%) 4. Like dogs (7, 12%) 5. Support/comfort (7, 12%) 6. Staff initiated (3, 5%) 7. Miss my dog (3, 5%)

**Question:** Are you glad that you met with the Therapy dog? Why?

**Who responded:** 144 of 161 (89%)  
 55 Adults and 89 Youth  
**Themed frequency**  
 Enjoyment/fun/nice(66, 46%) [40%Y & 55% A]  
 Like dog/like animals (32, 22%) [25%Y & 5% A]  
 Love dogs/lovable (22, 15%) [13%Y & 18% A]  
 Miss my dog (16, 11%) [7%Y & 18% A]  
 De-stress/calm/relax (16, 11%) [4%Y & 22% A]  
 Being with/cuddle dog (7, 5%) [8%Y & 0%A]

**Question:** What words would you use to describe your experience with the Therapy Dog today?

**Who responded:** 150 of 161 (93%); 58 Adult & 92 Youth  
**Themed frequency**  
 Enjoy/happy/good (119, 79%) [77% Y & 83%A]  
 De-stress/relaxing/calming (22) [2%Y & 34%A]  
 Love dog/loving (11, 7%) [5%Y & 10%A]  
 Unsure of experience (8, 5%) [8%Y & 2%A]  
 Support/comforted(7, 5%) [1%Y & 10%A]  
 Miss my dog (6, 4%) [4%Y & 3%A]

**Question:** Would you recommend the Therapy Dog program to other clients at the Calder Centre? In the Adult questionnaire only, 52 adults (83%) responded 'Yes', 3 (5%) 'Unsure' and remaining 13% did not respond. Why?

**Who responded?** Adult only, 50 of 161 (31%); 20 Female & 30 Male  
**Themed frequency:**  
 Enjoyment/happy/fun (15, 30%) [25%F/33%M]  
 De-stress/calm/relaxing (9, 18%) [20%F/17%M]  
 Like dogs/awesome dogs (7, 14%) [15%F/13%M]  
 Helps people/beneficial (8, 16%) [0%F/27% M]  
 Dogs are loving/unconditional (8,16%) [15% F/17% M]

**Question:** Any additional comments?  
**Who responded:** 66 of 161 (41%); 37 Adult & 29 Youth

**Themed frequency:**  
 Enjoyment/great time (24, 36%) [45%Y/30%A]  
 Keep coming (15, 23%) [17%Y/27%A]  
 Like the dog/great dog (10, 15%) [17%Y/14%A]  
 Loved it (6, 9%) [10%Y/8%A]  
 Good program (6, 9%) [7%Y/11%A]  
 Thank you (5, 8%) [3%Y/11%A]

## Staff: Rated Items

The 59 staff responses included rating their observations of the clients on six items (overnight staff had an extra item to rate on sleep) using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Unsure, Agree, Strongly Agree). On average, the staffs' strongest agreement was that the clients

smiled more/showed positive affect (average 4.1) and with 79% of staff responding 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed'. This average compares to the lowest average of 3.6 for the item on 'increased compliance', with 47% of the staff responding 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed'. On average, Adult staff (n=10), Youth staff (n=31), and Overnight staff (n=18) were very similar on rating the items.

5= 'Strongly Agree'	Average Rating			
	All	Adult	Youth	Over-night
Talked more openly	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.9
Increased participation	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.7
Smiled more	4.1	4.3	4.1	4.0
Less agitated	3.9	4.0	3.8	3.9
More relaxed	3.9	4.1	3.8	3.9
Increased compliance	3.6	3.2	3.6	3.6
Improved sleep	3.9			3.9

## Staff: Qualitative

**Question:** Do you think that spending time with the Therapy Dog made the clients feel loved? Approximately 75% of day staff and 56% of Overnight staff responded 'Yes'. The remaining staff were unsure.

**And Why? Who responded:** 49 of 59 (83%)  
 14 Night staff, 35 Day staff (7Adult/28Youth)

**Themed frequency**  
 Enjoyment/laughing/happy (27, 55%) [66% D/71%A/64%Y & 29%N]  
 Love Dogs (10, 20%) [23%D/14%A/25%Y & 14%N]  
 Positive change in client/more talkative(7, 14%) [14%D/0%A/18%Y & 14%N]  
 Miss dog (1,2%) [0%D & 7%N]  
 De-stress/calmer (2, 4%) [3%D/14%A/0%Y & 7%N]



**Question:** Do You think that spending time with the Therapy Dog made the clients feel supported?  
 90% of day Adult staff, 65% day Youth staff, and 39% of overnight staff responded 'Yes'. One day Youth staff did not respond and the remaining staff were unsure.

**And why? Who responded:** 35 of 59 (59%)  
 7 Night staff, 28 Day staff (8Adult/20Youth)

**Themed frequency:**  
 Support/Engagement (12, 34%) [39%D/38% A/40%Y & 14%N]  
 Positive change in client/positive/felt better after (11, 31%) [29%D/25%A/30%Y & 43%N]  
 Clients talk about own pets (4, 11%) [11%D/25% A/5%Y & 14%N]  
 Unsure (2) [4%D/0%A/5%Y & 14%N]  
 De-stress/calm (1, 3%) [0%D/0%A & 14%N]

# Findings continued

## Staff: Qualitative continued

**Question:** Do you think spending time with the Therapy Dog Handler made the clients feel supported?

70% of day Adult staff, 65% day Youth staff, and 33% of overnight staff responded 'Yes'. One day Adult staff and one Overnight staff did not respond and the remaining staff were unsure.

**And Why? Who responded?** 36 of 59(61%) 7 Night staff, 29 Day staff (7Adult/22Youth)

### Themed frequency:

Engagement/Conversations (18, 50%) [59% D/71%A/55%Y & 14%N]  
 Support/comfortable/attention (12, 33%) [34% D/71%A/23%Y & 29%N]  
 Enjoyment/smile (6, 17%) [29% D/0%A/18%Y & 29%N]  
 Unsure (5, 14%) [7%D/0%A/9%Y & 43%N]

**Question:** What words would you use to describe your clients' experiences with the Therapy Dog today?

**Who responded?** Day staff only 31 of 41 (75%) (8Adult/23Youth)

### Themed frequency:

Enjoyment/happy/fun (19, 61%) [50%A/65%Y]  
 Positive experience/beneficial (12, 39%) [25%A/43%Y]  
 Love dogs/loving (6, 19%) [25%A/17%Y]  
 De-stress/relief/calm (6, 19%) [13%A/22%Y]  
 Being with the dog (5, 16%) [25%A/13%Y]



**Question:** Any additional comments?

**Who responded:** 15 of 59 (25%) (4Adult/11Youth)

### Themed frequency:

Great Program (6, 40%) [25%A/45%Y]  
 Enjoyment (4, 27%) [0%A/36%Y]  
 Client mood improved (3, 20%) [50%A/9%Y]  
 De-stress (2, 13%) [50%A/0%Y]  
 Unsure (2, 13%) [25%A/9%Y]

## Staff, Handler, and Observer: Rated Items

In addition to the 59 staff, 37 Handler and 7 Observers rated their observations of the clients on three items using a 3-point Likert scale (Yes, Unsure, No).

The staffs' strongest agreement was the clients felt loved by the dog (average 2.7 & 71% responded 'Yes'). The handlers' strongest agreement was the clients felt supported by the dog (average 2.9 & 86% 'Yes'). The observers' strongest agreement was the clients felt support from the handler (average 3.0 & 100% 'Yes').

3 = 'Yes', Client feel...	Staff Average	Handler Average	Observer Average
Loved	2.7	2.5	2.4
Supported	2.6	2.9	2.9
Handler support	2.6	2.8	3.0

## Handler: Qualitative

**Question:** Why do you think the client came to spend time with the Therapy Dog?

**Who responded?** Handler 35 of the 37 (94%)

### Themed frequency:

Visit dog/spend time with dog (19, 54%)  
 Staff initiated (10, 29%)  
 Handler initiated (5, 14%)  
 Enjoyment (3, 9%)

**Question:** Do you think that spending time with the Therapy Dog makes the client feel loved? Why?

**Who responded?** Handler 36 of the 37 (97%)

### Themed frequency:

Unsure (15, 42%)  
 Be with dog/pet dogs/visit with dog (12, 33%)  
 Happy/enjoyment/smile (11, 31%)  
 De-stress/calm/relaxed (8, 22%)  
 Talk about their pets (5, 14%)  
 Love/kissing/cuddle with dog/hugs (4, 11%)  
 Miss dog (3, 8%)

**Question:** Do you think spending time with the Therapy Dog made the client feel supported? Why?

**Who responded?** Handler All 37 (100%)

### Themed frequency:

Being with dog/visit dog/pet dog (17, 46%)  
 Enjoyment/happy/smile (15, 41%)  
 Support/comforted/talk/connecting (12, 32%)  
 Talk about pets (6, 16%)  
 Unsure (5, 14%)  
 Love/like dogs (3, 8%)

**Question:** Do you think spending with the Therapy Dog handler made the client feel supported?

**Who responded?** Handler 36 of the 37 (97%)

### Themed frequency:

Support/chatting/sharing/connecting/comfortable with handler (25, 69%)  
 Unsure (8, 22%)  
 Enjoyment/fun/positive (3, 8%)  
 Be with dog/play with dog/visit with dog (3, 8%)



**Question:** What words would you use to describe the attendees' experience with the Therapy Dog?

**Who responded?** Handler All 37 (100%)

### Themed frequency:

Enjoyment/positive/happy/smile (28, 76%)  
 De-stress/calm/relax (15, 41%)  
 Supportive/comforting/sharing stories (5, 14%)  
 Be with dog/sat with dog/visit with dog (5, 14%)  
 Love/bonding (4, 11%)

## Observer: Qualitative

**Question:** Do you think that spending time with the Therapy Dog made the attendees feel loved?

**Who responded?** Observer All 7 (100%) responded

### Themed frequency:

Heard word love/hugs/kisses (4, 57%)  
 Unsure (3, 43%)  
 Enjoyment/smile (2, 29%)

**Question:** Do you think spending time with the Therapy Dog made the attendees feel supported?

**Who responded?** Observer All 7 (100%) responded

### Themed frequency:

Connection with dog/appreciative (6, 86%)  
 Enjoyment (1, 14%)  
 De-stress (1, 14%)

**Question:** Do you think spending time with the Therapy Dog Handler made the attendees feel supported?

**Who responded?** Observer All 7 (100%) responded

### Themed frequency:

Engaged conversation (6, 86%)  
 Made attendees comfortable (4, 57%)  
 Friendly (2, 29%)  
 Enjoyment (1, 14%)

**Question:** What words would you use to describe the attendees' experience with the Therapy Dogs?

**Who responded?** Observer All 7 (100%)

### Themed frequency:

Enjoyment/fun/happy/smile (5, 71%)  
 Love/connection/caring (4, 57%)  
 De-stress/relaxed (4, 57%)



## Group versus Individual

The rated items were examined by the individual versus group variable within the client and staff data and no significant mean differences were found.

## Youth Residential versus Youth Stabilization

The rated items were examined by the residential versus stabilization variable within the client data and no significant mean differences were found.

## Male versus Female

The rated items were examined by the male versus female variable within the client data. The female average for rating how they felt before visiting with the Therapy Dog was lower than for males but ended up the same after.

## Staff

Overall were similar in ratings with the exception that overnight staff were more uncertain on the 3-point Likert scale items.

# Discussion

Overall, the vast majority of youth and adult clients in the stabilization and residential programs very much enjoyed the time they spent with the Therapy Dog team, and specifically the dog, and felt better because of it. The adults had a greater change in pre and post visit ratings compared to the youth.

The outcomes/effects of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program are discussed within its two objectives. Support for both objectives was identified, as follows:

## **If and how clients experienced love and support from the Therapy Dog & support from the handler.**

### **LOVE**

Overall, the clients shared that they felt loved by the dog. Many expressed their love of animals generally, including for some their own pets.

*"I love animals, I love dogs. They were cool, made me miss my own pets." (Youth Residential client)*

This was supported by the staff, handlers and observers. They felt the Therapy Dog offered the clients emotional attention. It also offered physical affection, for example, by laying beside the human and being hugged or pet.

*"client rolling in grass laughing while dog was licking her, snuggling, heard the client state "I love you, I want to take you home" (Staff)*

*"client wanted to lay on floor and cuddle with the dog and that is what she [the client] did, seemed content at that time" (Handler)*

*"the word love was said many times - with the one-on-one experience the person felt comfortable to open up; I could see it on her face the love she felt from [the Therapy Dog], she kept on smiling during her entire session; [the Therapy Dog] gave her his full attention (Observer)*

The literature identifies dogs' innate ability to offer and receive nurturance (Chandler, 2005; Levinson, 1984; Melson & Fine, 2010). Therapy Dogs present with non-judgmental warmth, companionship and bonding, which in turn nurtures the ability of humans to love and trust (Arkow, 2011). In fact, it has been reported that interacting with dogs can, for some, parallel the social support experienced in human-human relationships (Fine & Beck, 2010). Animals can trigger happy memories, improve mood, and bring a sense of happiness, joy and a general sense of wellbeing to individuals (Arkow, 2011). Perceived shifts in participants' feelings and mood may also be influenced by beneficial hormones and neurochemicals that are released when petting an animal, including oxytocin, prolactin, dopamine, beta endorphins and phenylethylamine (Odendaal & Lehmann, 2000).

### **SUPPORT**

The clients shared that they felt supported by

the dogs, as well as the handlers although to a less extent.

*"I am glad that I met [the Therapy Dog] today. The meeting was more than I thought it would be. Animals are in the moment and live each moment in the present. It was a nice reminder" (Adult client)*

*"I feel that the dogs and the owners bring smiles and great feelings to the people in Calder. Thank you for bringing the dogs and talking time out of your day to spend with us" (Adult client)*

Support was interpreted by the staff, Therapy Dog handlers and observers as allowing the clients to talk, engage more, and connect with positive behaviour.

*"clients liked engaging in conversation with the handler about their love of dogs, their own dogs, asking questions" (Staff)*

*"we spoke a lot about her headaches, how she may be detoxing, how I suffer from them, how food impacts our diets, etc" (Handler)*

*"The handler made people comfortable and helped open dialogue around the dog and owning pets; The participants appeared to appreciate the relaxed atmosphere during their interaction with the dog" (Observer)*

The literature shares that an animal can instill relief from stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002). Arkow (2011) refers to therapy dogs as "a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support" (p.2). Kruger and Serpell (2010) suggest that they can be calming and reduce anxiety, and serve as a buffer from anxiety-generating stimuli. Physiological changes in humans can also occur, including lowered blood pressure, heart rate, levels of cholesterol and triglycerides, and increased dopamine production which reduces the stress hormone cortisol (Kruger & Serpell, 2010 as cited in Arkow 2011; Wilson 1987).

The handlers' offering of support alongside the therapy animals has only recently been acknowledged in the literature (Adams, et al., 2015). There is, for example, evidence that the presence of a dog in a counselling session can facilitate a client's communication and feelings of comfort. Wesley, Minatrea, and Watson (2009) found in their study of an adult residential substance abuse program that clients were more likely to open up in the presence of a dog about their histories of violence and trauma. We have seen glimpses of this as well in the work of Hodgson and Darling (2011) on the physician pet query, in which a primary care provider can more fully determine their patients' environmental history and social context by asking about pets.

### **OTHER THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS**

One of the only studies of Therapy Dogs in a residential substance abuse treatment facility focused on Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

(dogs in therapy sessions). The research evaluated the effect of AAT on therapeutic alliance in group therapy and found that the presence of a dog enhanced it (Wesley, Minatrea & Watson, 2009). The staff in our study likewise shared that they felt the clients talked more openly and engaged more generally because of the Therapy Dog's presence.

In this study the clients rated their feelings after visiting with the dog very high, including being present and in the moment and having reduced stress and feeling calm. The clients overwhelmingly shared that the dogs made them just feel happy.

*"I feel happy. It was a nice surprise he made me smile and laugh" (Adult client)*

*"happy, mood instantly went up, dog loves unconditionally and it's good to feel that" (Youth Residential client)*

The staff, handlers and observers strongly agreed that the client showed more positive affect (e.g., smiled) with the dog present. They also positively rated their relaxation.

*"clients respond positively to the dog. Things always seem a bit calmer and peaceful for a while after visit." (Staff)*

*"she had a huge smile on her face the entire time she was with him [the dog]" (Observer)*

*"petting and massaging dog for almost all of visit. Smiling, connecting" (Handler)*

The literature shares dogs live in the present moment and this can therefore be helpful for humans to be present (B. Doan, personal communication, Nov 14, 2014). Individuals can gain a sense of comfort from being with a dog in the here and now. Harris (as cited in Johnson, 2011) shares that "by expressing their pure joy at seeing us, our pets teach us that living in the moment is not only a healthy thing to do, but also helps us to feel happier" (pp. 33).

### **Group versus Individual and Youth Residential versus Youth Stabilization**

No significant mean differences were found in the rated items when examined by type of visit (individual vs group) in the client and staff data and by type of youth program (residential vs stabilization) in the client data.

### **Male versus Female**

Similarly, no significant mean differences were found in the rated items when examined by gender, with the exception that females rated lower feelings before visiting with the Therapy Dog compared to males but ended up with similar rating after their dog time.



# Practice & Research Recommendations

- Given the finding that staff strongly agreed that clients showed more positive affect after visiting with a Therapy Dog, and staff agreement that there was increased client compliance after the visit, explore options for offering Therapy Dogs during night shifts when settling and managing behaviours with clients are more challenging. Likewise, explore whether there is a way to more formally implement the Therapy Dog program on week-ends.
- Explore Animal Assisted Interventions in additional ways at Calder: integration of a Therapy Dog into stress management workshops; continue with AAT in the psychology program and evaluate it; incorporate, if ever possible, a Therapy Dog into Calder's home group settings.
- Explore the benefits of cats.
- Explore incorporating the Pet Query in Calder's intake work.
- Explore options with animal-focused organizations, such as New Hope Dog Rescue, SCAT Street Cat Rescue & Saskatoon SPCA.
- Integrate the role of the recreation therapist at Calder into AAI's.
- Explore how to involve the clients' pets into their recovery plans.
- Conduct interviews and focus groups in the next stage of the research for more in-depth understanding.
- Explore how AAI's impact staff satisfaction and productivity.

**PILOT STUDY CONCLUSION**  
The outcomes/effects of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program at the Calder Centre support its two objectives, in addition to providing clients with additional therapeutic benefits.



This Fact Sheet is one in a series. The findings of the Facts Sheets cannot be directly compared to one another because the AAI programs vary in clients, approaches and species.

Visit our website:  
[www.tinyurl/aat-addiction](http://www.tinyurl/aat-addiction)

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