

Cerebral Palsy Individuals Benefit from Kitten Therapy

A partnership between WHS and UCP provides care for both kittens and people.

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Therapy kittens, like Fat Fat, help individuals with cerebral palsy improve motor and sensory skills, as well as provide emotional therapy.

The Washington Humane Society has teamed up with United Cerebral Palsy of Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia to provide therapy assistance animals for UCP individuals. Kittens from the WHS Therapy Live-in Cats program currently live at the UCP facilities, where cerebral palsy individuals go for treatment. The TLC kittens provide emotional and physical therapy, helping patients improve their motor and sensory skills by being lovable pets.

Nearly 200 UCP patients are benefiting from this new WHS program. The program started last winter and has been so successful it has been expanded to both UCP facilities in the Washington area.

"While we do look for some traits that are characteristic of a therapy assistance animal, including sociability and a higher tolerance for handling, the uniqueness of our program allows us to expand our 'pool of candidates,' as well, so to speak," said Katherine Zenzano, behavior and training counselor at the WHS behavior and learning center. "We don't overlook the kittens that also need additional socialization and care."

WHS has fully trained the UCP staff members to care for the kittens and has provided all the essential supplies, including food, kitty litter, bowls and even a cat condo. According to Dawn Carter, executive director of UCP Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia, the cat program benefits individuals with disabilities for several reasons. Cats providing individuals companionship and unconditional love, cat- and animal-assisted therapy can help individuals increase independence and cat or animal therapy improves cognitive, physical and psychological rehabilitation by combining cats and conventional methods to assist in rehabilitation.

"The greatest benefit that the cat program has brought to the individuals receiving services at UCP is from sensory integration," Carter said. "Several individuals receiving services have a disorder that causes difficulty with processing information from five senses [touch, vision, auditory, taste, olfaction], the difference is that information is processed by brain in a different way and may cause confusion or distress, animals assist individuals to integrate the five senses in a therapeutic manner."

The cats benefit from the program, too. They become socialized the more they are handled.

"What differentiates our program from other therapy assistance programs is that it is also partially a foster program and part of fostering includes socializing a young animal," Zenzano said. "Most kittens are great about being gently touched, held and petted. Some will cuddle right up or begin purring. That's the real therapy."