

Pet Therapy in Florida's Assisted Living Communities

BACKGROUND

Over 3,000 assisted living communities (ALCs) operate in the state of Florida and offer a variety of therapeutic options. Pet therapy is one such program, designed to promote physical activity, encourage socialization, and enhance well-being in residents.¹ Interacting with an animal, such as a dog, cat, or even a horse, may help alleviate loneliness, depression, and age-related physical conditions (e.g. cardiovascular disease).²⁻³ It is unclear how the availability of pet therapy varies by ALC characteristic (e.g. profit status, location). Therefore, this brief aims to identify the proportion of ALCs in Florida that offer pet therapy and how this varies by key ALC characteristics.

STUDY METHOD

Data on pet therapy services and ALC profit status, license type, size, and location were retrieved from the Agency for Health Care Administration.* License type was categorized as a standard license, extended congregate care (ECC), limited nursing service (LNS), or limited mental health (LMH; see June et al. (2020) for further description of these licenses).⁴ Profit status was categorized as for-profit versus not-for-profit, and size was based on the number of beds, where ALCs with 15 beds or less were categorized as small and those with more than 15 beds were categorized as large. U.S. Census data was also used in this study to identify which ALCs were in a rural county or in an urban county.⁵ Counties were classified as rural if they contained less than 100 people per square mile.

FINDINGS

Across Florida's ALCs, only 605 of 3,090 (20%) provided pet therapy. As seen in Table 1, 20% of ALCs that were operating under a standard license provided this therapy. Thirty-three percent of ALCs with an ECC license also provided this. Additionally, a similar proportion of ALCs with an LNS license (31%) provided pet therapy, while only 6% of LMH-licensed ALCs did so. Non-profit ALCs were more likely to provide pet therapy (32%) than for-profit ALCs (19%). This was also true for ALCs in urban counties (19%) compared to those in rural counties (15%). Finally, small ALCs were more likely to provide pet therapy (58%) than larger ALCs (42%).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Pet therapy may help prevent or relieve physiological ailments in older adults, according to prior research.¹ For older adults with dementia who are also experiencing depression or loneliness, having the companionship of an animal may improve their physical and mental well-being. However, our results suggest ALC residents in Florida are underserved regarding this important service. This is an issue, as older adults experiencing loneliness and social isolation often exhibit physical ailments, psychological distress, and poorer quality of life.¹ ALCs operating with an ECC, LNS, or LMH license often serve residents with higher levels of physical and cognitive impairment and yet, do not frequently offer pet therapy as a means of improving quality of life and well-being.⁶ Florida policymakers should work to provide ALCs with incentives to provide pet

*Data was collected on February 6, 2020

therapy, given prior research concerning its potential to improve the health and quality of residents' lives.

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Table 1. Pet Therapy Availability Across ALC Characteristics.

ALC Characteristics	Pet Therapy: Present	Pet Therapy: Absent
Profit Status		
For-Profit	543 (19%)	2350 (81%)
Non-Profit	62 (32%)	135 (69%)
Bed Size		
Small	353 (58%)	815 (32%)
Large	252 (42%)	1670 (67%)
License Type		
Standard	349 (20%)	1389 (80%)
ECC	85 (33%)	168 (66%)
LNS	149 (31%)	327 (69%)
LMH	45 (6%)	696 (94%)
Region		
Urban	593 (20%)	2418 (80%)
Rural	12 (15%)	67 (84%)
Source: Surveying Agency for Healthcare Administration.		
Note. ALC= Assisted living community.		