

Social barriers broken down via pet program that supports older and disabled people

Benefits of volunteers in urban settings

- Builds bridges between new and seasoned residents
- Enables personal satisfaction through opportunity to volunteer in busy environment
- Helps older people stay in their own homes longer and remain in contact with their community

Pets provide the reason for contact amongst local residents who may otherwise remain isolated from one another. Pets can also contribute to reduced loneliness and depression, two common problems facing people as they age.

The PetLinks program enables people to gain personal satisfaction through volunteering, helps prevent social isolation among the elderly and assists older people to stay in their own homes for longer periods of time. In 1996, the Victorian Government launched the PetLinks program in Port Melbourne to support older people and people with disabilities who wanted to own pets.

The PetLinks project recruits volunteers to provide services that include pet walking, washing and grooming, transport and foster care.

The program is run as a community based incorporated association and holds a community driven service agreement with the City of Port Phillip, Melbourne.

Mary Kehoe is the Volunteer Coordinator at the South Port Day Links in Port Melbourne. Along with three other support programs, Mary manages PetLinks, matching the most appropriate volunteer to the most suitable pet owner and situation.

"It's a highly popular program. There are in fact many more people who want to volunteer than there are clients." Mary Kehoe, City of Port Phillip

A recent trend that Mary has identified as a volunteer source is young people moving into apartments in the Port Phillip area where it can be difficult to accommodate a pet of their own.

"They have often come from the country and deeply miss the relationships that they had with their own pet. PetLinks can provide an opportunity for them to satisfy their needs while helping out older members of the community."

The program is also helping break down social barriers between people within communities that might otherwise remain isolated from each other.

"We have a new community here called "Beacon Cove" and we're finding that PetLinks is serving to break down the social barriers that can so easily occur between new community members and the older members in the area," says Mary. "PetLinks is bringing these two very different communities together and each is coming to realise that the other is not so bad after all."

Mary is also acutely aware that the program helps people stay in their houses for longer, which is not only important to the individual but a growing priority for government and the healthcare system as Australia's population continues to age.

"Our clients are so grateful to the volunteers, regardless of whether they come once or three times a week. It's a real community strengthening process which is wonderful to see in action." Mary Kehoe

Web Links

South Port Day Links - www.spdl.org.au

Tips

- Identify an appropriate existing community organisation to manage the program
- Identify elderly and disabled residents in need of assistance
- Advertise for recruitment of volunteers
- Promote the program with Council media tools

