

Dogs Paired With Providers at Hospitals Help Ease Staff and Patient Stress

Doctors and nurses are facing a growing mental health crisis driven by their experiences at work.

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Outside [HCA HealthONE Rose](#) medical center, the snow is flying. Inside, on the third floor, there's a flurry of activity within the labor and delivery unit.

"There's a lot of action up here. It can be very stressful at times," said Kristina Fraser, an OB-GYN in blue scrubs.

Nurses wheel a very pregnant mom past.

"We're going to bring a baby into this world safely," Fraser said, "and off we go."

She said she feels ready in part due to a calming moment she had just a few minutes earlier with some canine colleagues.

A pair of dogs, tails wagging, had come by a nearby nursing station, causing about a dozen medical professionals to melt into a collective puddle of affection. A yellow Lab named Peppi showered Fraser in nuzzles and kisses. "I don't know if a human baby smells as good as that puppy breath!" Fraser had said as her colleagues laughed.

The dogs aren't visitors. They work here, too, specifically for the benefit of the staff. "I feel like that dog just walks on and everybody takes a big deep breath and gets down on the ground and has a few moments of just decompressing," Fraser said. "It's great. It's amazing."

Hospital staffers who work with the dogs say there is virtually no bite risk with the carefully trained Labradors, the preferred breed for this work.

The dogs are kept away from allergic patients and washed regularly to prevent germs from spreading, and people must wash their hands before and after petting them.

Doctors and nurses are facing a growing mental health crisis driven by their experiences at work. They and other health care colleagues face [high rates of depression](#), anxiety, [stress](#), [suicidal](#)

[ideation](#), and burnout. Nearly half of health workers reported often feeling burned out in 2022, an increase from 2018, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). And the percentage of health care workers who [reported harassment](#) at work more than doubled over that four-year period. Advocates for the presence of dogs in hospitals see the animals as one thing that can help.

That includes Peppi's handler, Susan Ryan, an emergency medicine physician at Rose.

Ryan said years working as an emergency room doctor left her with symptoms of PTSD. "I just was messed up and I knew it," said Ryan, who isolated more at home and didn't want to engage with friends. "I shoved it all in. I think we all do."

She said doctors and other providers can be good at hiding their struggles, because they have to compartmentalize. "How else can I go from a patient who had a cardiac arrest, deal with the family members telling them that, and go to a room where another person is mad that they've had to wait 45 minutes for their ear pain? And I have to flip that switch."

To cope with her symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, Ryan started doing therapy with horses. But she couldn't have a horse in her backyard, so she got a Labrador.

Ryan received training from a national service dog group called [Canine Companions](#), becoming the first doctor trained by the group to have a facility dog in an emergency room. Canine Companions has graduated more than 8,000 service dogs.

The Rose medical center gave Ryan approval to bring a dog to work during her ER shifts. Ryan's colleagues said they are delighted that a dog is part of their work life.

"When I have a bad day at work and I come to Rose and Peppi is here, my day's going to be made better," EMT Jasmine Richardson said. "And if I have a patient who's having a tough day, Peppi just knows how to light up the room."

Nursing supervisor Eric Vaillancourt agreed, calling Peppi "joyful."

Ryan had another dog, Wynn, working with her during the height of the pandemic. She said she thinks Wynn made a huge difference. "It saved people," she said. "We had new nurses that had never seen death before, and now they're seeing a covid death. And we were worried sick we were dying."

She said her hospital system has lost a couple of physicians to suicide in the past two years, which HCA confirmed to KFF Health News and NPR. Ryan hopes the canine connection can help with trauma. "Anything that brings you back to the present time helps ground you again. A dog can be that calming influence," she said. "You can get down on the ground, pet them, and you just get calm."

Ryan said research has shown the advantages. For example, [one review of dozens of original](#)

[studies](#) on human-animal interactions found benefits for a variety of conditions including behavioral and mood issues and physical symptoms of stress.

Rose's president and CEO, Casey Guber, became such a believer in the canine connection he got his own trained dog to bring to the hospital, a black Lab-retriever mix named Ralphie.

She wears a badge: Chief Dog Officer.

Guber said she's a big morale booster. "Phenomenal," he said. "It is not uncommon to see a surgeon coming down to our administration office and rolling on the ground with Ralphie, or one of our nurses taking Ralphie out for a walk in the park."

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