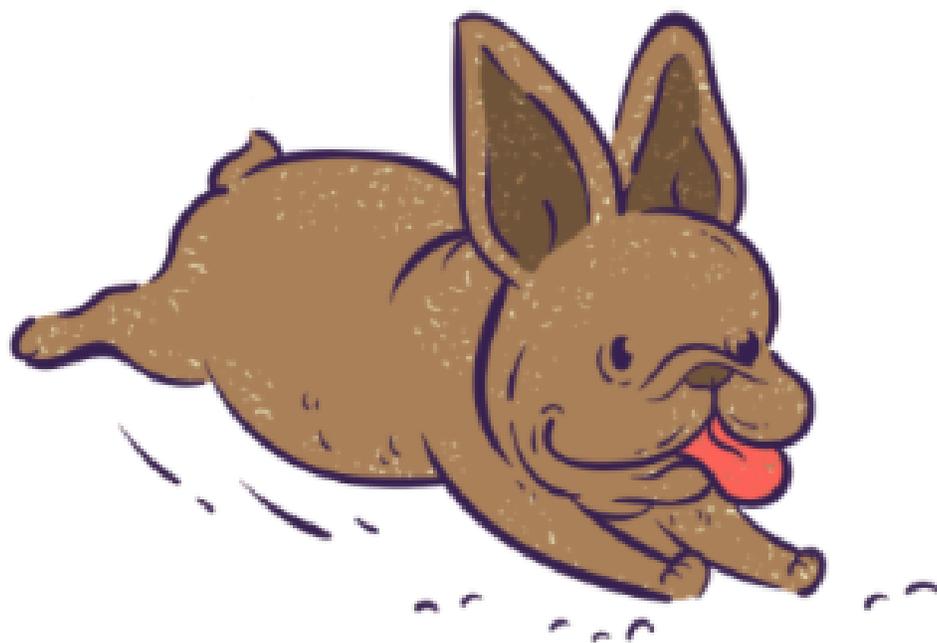


*Hearts and Hounds: A Therapy Dog Program for Children in Inpatient Psychiatric Treatment*

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To UCLA Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital



## **Introduction**

The Hearts and Hounds program aims to incorporate therapy dogs into the UCLA Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital's 4 West Child and Adolescent Psychiatry wing for the purpose of grounding and stress management. The ever-expanding field of human-canine psychological research has shown us that interacting with therapy dogs can contribute significantly to emotional well-being, stress management, and impulse control in children. This proposal outlines the background, goals, implementation strategies, budget, and intended evaluation methods of the Hearts and Hounds AAT program, demonstrating its value as an ethically sound and cost-effective wellness initiative.

## **Background and Needs Assessment**

Childhood hospitalization and institutionalization can be an emotionally damaging and psychologically traumatizing experience. Children in both medical and psychological treatment settings face numerous stressors including unfamiliar environments and people, removal from home life, clinical exams, and uncertainty around treatment plans or progression. Because the symptoms of anxiety themselves (eg. avoidance, restlessness, black and white thinking) can interfere with therapeutic engagement and social interaction, calming anxiety and creating a comforting atmosphere can enhance interpersonal interactions and treatment outcomes.

In the past three decades, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has emerged as a promising intervention to mitigate these challenges. Therapy dogs have been shown to not only decrease symptoms of anxiety through providing grounding techniques like tactile stimulation and serving as emotional anchors and motivators, but also increase therapeutic and social engagement.

Studies have also consistently shown links between the presence of therapy dogs and increased production of oxytocin, a hormone of which low levels have been linked to increased symptoms of depression. Beyond physiological benefits, therapy dogs provide emotional grounding, companionship, and a sense of normalcy in otherwise stressful environments. For children in psychiatric care, these interactions can encourage trust, participation in therapeutic activities, and reduce oppositional behaviors. The Hearts and Hounds program responds directly to this need, offering a structured, trauma-informed, and patient-centered intervention that addresses both the emotional and behavioral challenges faced by hospitalized adolescents.

## **Program Goals and Objectives**

The overarching goal of Hearts and Hounds is to enhance the emotional well-being of the adolescent patients in UCLA inpatient psychiatric care by providing clinically tested, controlled, and consistent access to therapy dogs. The program seeks to create a calm and comforting, treatment-conducive environment within the 4 West units, where patients can feel safe, supported, and welcome. By integrating therapy dogs into the hospital's wellness strategies, UCLA Health can strengthen its commitment to innovation and provide unequivocally patient-centered care. The program's objectives are both measurable and practical:

- Therapy dog sessions will be hosted **twice weekly**, with a target of at least **twenty patient participants per session**.
- These sessions will be designed to **reduce self-reported stress levels by 20%**, as measured through daily patient meetings where children complete feelings scales.
- Additionally, the program aims to **reduce patient refusals to attend therapeutic activities by 20%**, thereby increasing overall engagement in treatment.

## **Implementation Plan**

The Hearts and Hounds program will be structured to ensure consistency, safety, and accessibility. Sessions will be held in the activity rooms of Units A and B of the 4-West pediatric psychiatry wing. The initial schedule will start with bi-weekly rotating visits. Every Tuesday, therapy dogs will be brought to the A unit for a 1 hour session and every Thursday they will be brought to the B unit for a 1 hour session. This schedule ensures equitable access across units while maintaining predictability for patients and staff. It will be revisited with a cost-benefit analysis after each quarter to assess whether more frequent visits could be beneficial. The program will partner with Love on 4 Paws, a therapy dog organization founded in 1997 by Sharlene Lauret. Love on 4 Paws has a proven track record of providing certified therapy dogs and trained handlers for clinical settings.

Volunteers will include dog handlers and event facilitators, who will work alongside hospital staff to ensure safe and reliable session management. Considering that most of our patients come to the UCLA Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital in states of legitimate psychological crisis, all volunteers must go through basic mental health first aid training. Volunteers must also submit a federal background check form for work involving close contact with children, and will be permitted to facilitate in-unit activities once approved by the Department of Justice's statewide CACI database. All therapy dogs will be certified, fully vaccinated, spayed/neutered, and screened for temperament suitability in pediatric psychiatric environments.

Logistical considerations will prioritize patient safety and choice. Sessions will be announced during daily meetings the day before visits and the day of visits, to prepare patients for the incoming volunteers. A designated "dog-free zone" will be established for patients who

prefer not to engage with the dogs, ensuring that participation remains voluntary and respectful of individual needs. Unit staff members will be trained to support both patients who engage with the dogs and those who opt out of the visits.

## **Budget and Funding**

The projected expenses for Hearts and Hounds are modest relative to the anticipated benefits. Therapy dog organization fees are estimated at \$3,200 to \$6,000 per quarter, depending on the number of dogs and handlers available for consistent bi-weekly visits, as well as the percentage of existing unit staff members who will require additional training. Staff training and support will require an annual investment of approximately \$1,200, ensuring that hospital personnel are adequately prepared to facilitate sessions. Miscellaneous expenses, including snacks, water bowls, and cleaning supplies, are estimated at \$200. The total budget for the program ranges from \$3,800 to \$6,600 annually, making it a cost-effective intervention with significant potential impact.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Estimated Cost (\$)</b>
Therapy Dog Organization Fees	\$600 - \$1,300 quarterly
Staff Training and Support	\$1,200
Miscellaneous (snacks, water bowls)	\$200
<b>Total Estimated Annual Cost</b>	<b>\$3,800 - \$6,600</b>

Funding sources may include the UCLA Innovation Fund, which supports innovative wellness initiatives, as well as individual donors or community sponsorships. By leveraging both institutional and community resources, Hearts and Hounds can be sustained as a long-term component of UCLA Health's wellness strategy.

## **Evaluation and Assessment**

Evaluation is central to demonstrating the effectiveness of Hearts and Hounds. The program will employ both quantitative and qualitative assessment strategies. Attendance records will be maintained to track participation rates and refusals, providing measurable data on engagement. Self-reported anxiety scales, already integrated into morning and evening meetings, will be used to assess changes in stress levels. These scales will be recorded systematically, allowing for longitudinal analysis of patient outcomes. In addition to quantitative measures, qualitative data will be gathered through observations and testimonials from nursing staff, clinicians, and patients themselves. These narratives will provide more detailed insights into the emotional and behavioral impact of therapy dog sessions, capturing outcomes that may not be fully reflected in numerical data.

Formal data collection will begin in Units A, B, and C of the 4-West pediatric psychiatry wing two months prior to the first Hearts & Hounds unit visit. Data collected during the active phase of the program will be analyzed regularly against data collected prior to the program beginning to assess the program's effectiveness on reaching its objectives and identify areas for improvement. Data collected in the C Unit will be utilized as a control group and, as there is zero contact between patients in the C Unit and patients in Units A and B, leaving no room for a skewed treatment experience in either direction. Data from the days the dogs are present in the A

and B units will also be tested against data from the days the dogs are not present. Findings will be shared with the executive and clinical teams to ensure transparency and accountability. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative measures, Hearts and Hounds will provide a comprehensive evaluation of its impact, reinforcing its value as a research-backed intervention.

## **Conclusion**

The Hearts & Hounds program provides a safe, research-backed method of supporting children with complex diagnoses and treatment plans. By providing consistent access to therapy dogs, the program addresses the emotional and behavioral challenges of hospitalization, fostering a more positive and grounding experience for patients. With modest financial investment and strong evidence of effectiveness, Hearts and Hounds offers significant psychological and physiological benefits for children with complex diagnoses. Approval and support from the executive and clinical teams of UCLA Health's Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital will enable this program to move forward, bringing comfort, companionship, and alternative methods of healing to some of our hospital's most vulnerable patients.