PET THERAPY EASES ANXIETY FOR PATIENTS AT EXCELA HEALTH

GREENSBURG, PA, July 3, 2017 …Bright lights, loud noises, unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells - and the general commotion associated with a holiday observance - can be a source of stress for people and animals alike. Understanding that hospitalization is another source of emotional distress, Excela Health has an antidote for the anxiety that often accompanies an illness and unplanned hospital stay – pet therapy.

After a person is hospitalized, visits from loved ones can boost morale. When guests are the four-footed kind, patients respond even more positively. Excela Health has been providing pet therapy at its three hospitals – Frick, Latrobe and Westmoreland - for six years, and more recently, at its outpatient facility, Excela Square at Norwin.

Currently there are 30 dogs and their handlers whose care assignments range from outpatient waiting room duty to bedside visits. Pets in the program range in size from a 4-pound Yorkshire terrier to a 100-pound Old English sheepdog and represent a variety of breeds and an assortment of sizes in between.

Unfazed by wheelchairs, walkers and crutches, the dogs provide a pleasant distraction and add enjoyment and fun to uncomfortable situations for children and adults alike. Under the guidance of Marilyn Daniels, coordinator, Pet Therapy, the program continues to expand as part of Excela’s effort to enhance the patient experience under the direction of Martin Lang, vice president of Patient Experience at Excela Health.
Research has shown that pet therapy provides various health benefits to the patients and others the dogs encounter. It temporarily:

- eases stress and anxiety
- offers comfort and company
- elevates mood
- lowers blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate
- reduces the perception of pain
- reduces boredom and provides a distraction from illness

In addition, the owners also engage with patients, providing them with an opportunity to talk about their own pets, family pets and other topics of interest. Having the chance to pet a dog helps family members and visitors take their minds off their troubles—feelings everyone experiences when a loved one is hospitalized.

In waiting areas, it often encourages conversations among visitors. Seniors, who may not have as many visitors, seem to especially enjoy the dogs, often reminiscing about the dogs they have had over the years. Most children just naturally gravitate to these furry friends, who provide creature comfort in an unfamiliar environment.

All dogs in Excela Health program are registered as a therapy dog through one of a number of national or regional organizations such as Alliance of Therapy Dogs (formerly Therapy Dogs Inc.), Therapy Dogs International or Therapy Dogs United. In addition to basic commands, testing includes requisites specific to the environments in which the dog will be working, such as not being frightened by sudden, loud or strange noises or by people with canes, wheelchairs, etc. Regardless of the breed—purebred or mixed—top priority on the list, of course, is a sweet temperament—one that is comfortable with strangers and enjoys frequent petting. The dogs, of course, must be up-to-date on their own health requirements.
Volunteers select the facility they and their dogs will visit, the frequency and the day of the week. Daniels then assigns them to cover certain units/areas, depending on the volunteers’ availability and the system’s needs. Evening and weekend time allows those who work to become team members, too. During their visits, they interact with patients, families, visitors, staff and employees alike, and they often spend time in the lobbies, greeting those entering and exiting.

Based on the positive feedback received, Excela Health continues to explore opportunities to recruit new pet therapy teams. Anyone with a registered pet therapy dog is welcome to contact Daniels at 724-537-1275 or mdaniels@excelahealth.org.