Learning Objectives

1. Define peer support and animal assisted therapy as mental health support modalities within healthcare settings.
2. Explore a model of unified peer support and pet therapy as a novel approach to engaging frontline healthcare workers.
3. Review the initial successes of the model and communication mechanisms used to drive that success.

Background

In the uncertainty of the healthcare landscape since 2020, frontline caregivers of all backgrounds have been struggling to find balance, solace, and respite. The Paws to Reflect program was developed as a novel, evidence-informed approach to peer support that uses animal assisted therapy to lower the barrier to entry on difficult, often stigmatized conversations.

The program’s creation utilized a PDGA framework with emphasis on active and frequent listening, deep, intentional empathy, and rapid iteration to meet our employees’ needs. The program utilizes and enhances existing volunteer-based structures, making it extremely high-yield for low financial investment.

Methods

Listen
Surveyed over 1,500 hospital-based employees, primarily nurses, on frontline mental health challenges, barriers to supporting seek, and ways they’d like to be supported. Pet therapy emerged as a leading area of opportunity.

Empathize
Created a persona utilizing those inputs to explore new ways for supporting the complex emotional load, grief, moral distress, and exhaustion felt daily by individuals and families.

Hypothesize
Literature reviews demonstrated both animal assisted therapy and peer support as singular successful modalities to provide support for the healthcare workforce. We hypothesized that together they may amplify efficacy and support for help seeking.

Establish
Formed a unique program housed within the Center for Professionalism and Well-being for therapy to expand the impact of peer support.

Design
Created a workflow to allow trained peer supporters to round with therapy dog handlers, providing a deeper level of support beyond the everyday.”

Adapt
Adapted existing policies to onboard and contribute time, creating a unique onboarding and volunteerism experience for the new pet handlers.

Brand
Partnership with marketing division to create a multi-channel internal and external marketing campaign, including unique brand identities and supportive materials for MPATH and Paws to Reflect.

Recruit
Utilized multiple media outlets to recruit new, interested pet owners. Monetary incentivization was provided for completion of dog therapy certification with the Paws to Reflect program.

Prepare
Reimagined the MPATH Peer Support curriculum and recruited over 200 new peer supporters eligible to volunteer to round with Paws dogs and handlers.

Launch
Rounding initiated in May of 2023 with 1 dog and 17 peer supporters. The program has grown to include 19 dogs and 257 peer supporters as of March 1, 2024.

Results

100% of participants report positive mood improvement after visit, with 91% of those participants rating their mood as “excellent”.

Data Collection

Over 1,200 employees that have received Paws to Reflect visits were asked a ten-question, visual Likert scale survey to assess 1) Mood Prior to Visit and 2) Mood After Visit.

Conclusion

Demand for the Paws to Reflect program is increasing rapidly. Although the program required low fiscal investment, challenges exist in balancing fiscal sustainability with opportunities and team requests for expansion. Additional challenges include accessibility for outlying healthcare offices in a geographically expansive organization and the increasing work from home employee population. Assessment of duration of mood improvement and potential protective benefits could enhance the longer-term impact of this program.

While the systemic drivers of burnout cannot be addressed by pet therapy or peer support alone, the value of the Paws to Reflect Program is the shift to a culture where we meet healthcare workers where they are; we bring supportive conversations, intentional respite, awareness of resources and moments of meaning infused into their workday. By taking the direct feedback of staff and creating a novel structure to deliver on their requests, we continue to facilitate spaces of dialogue that say “We’re here, we’re listening. We’re ready to support you. What can we do next?”