

Jenifer Pilz-Coulibaly, Nursing

Year in School: Senior
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Rebecca Johnson, Nursing
Funding Source: Missouri Foundation for Health

Walking for healthy hearts dog walk program

Missouri has a rapidly increasing number of economically disadvantaged older adults who rely on Medicare and Medicaid for health care. Many chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, do not qualify for physical therapy. "Healthy People 2010" identified inactivity is linked to the progression of devastating, costly chronic illnesses in elders. Walking is the number one leading health benefit: helping to minimize risk factors, preventing disability and maintains body functions, and reducing depression and anxiety. If Missouri's elders are to benefit from an activity program, it must be inexpensive, accessible and innovative. Studies show the benefits of human-animal interactions to elders. Pet attachment has been associated with lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and triglyceride levels, greater likelihood of a healthy more social lifestyle including exercise, improved survival rate among those with heart disease, decreased depression and improved morale. The project used in this study, a gradually advancing walking program, looked at the health effects of coupling specially trained dogs (owned by faculty, staff or students of the MU College of Veterinary Medicine) and a handler (to ensure safety of the dyad) with economically disadvantaged disabled elders who have a multiple of challenges. This poster presentation will focus on the changes in body weight among participants during the program, and the extent to which they viewed the dog as a motivator for their continued participation. After informed written consent was obtained participants had their cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood sugar levels monitored. Blood pressure and body weight were recorded weekly. Participant's comments about the program and the dog were recorded after each walk. Thirteen participants included 7 females and 6 males aged 40-80 (mean age 52). A total net weight loss across the group was 128 pounds (mean weight loss 14.4 pounds). Participants described their relationship with the dogs as a positive force in their lives, inspiring them to "be better people," to "get up in the morning," and to "make them feel better." The dog-walking program was very effective in helping the participants lose weight. Participants stated that the dogs loved them unconditionally, and made the walking a pleasant part of their day rather than an exercise chore. The protocol may benefit others in subsidized housing as it is relatively inexpensive to implement and minimally burdensome to participants.