



# One Wag At A Time

*Hearts and Paws Comfort Dogs heals the local community through pets and paws, snuggles and nuzzles.*

By Leslie Hatton

## Not all heroes wear capes.

Some have wagging tails and wet noses. And Hearts and Paws Comfort Dogs (HPCD) is a nonprofit organization with several of them—all dedicated to delivering and spreading joy.

The idea of the group was formed in 2021 around a dining table that sat a few people, all with the single-minded purpose of wanting to spread unconditional love. This group of passionate dog lovers came together and created a nonprofit organization (501c3) dedicated to bringing comfort to people of all ages through specially trained dogs. President

Amy Usowski reflects, “After that initial meeting, the rest is history as they say. We have really passionate people dedicated to what we do. All of whom have various talents, skills and other jobs. Everyone contributes.”

When the group officially launched in 2022, it consisted of just 15 members and 6 dogs, but







today, there are 65 members and around 35 dogs. They frequently visit various locations across Cape Cod, including Rock Harbor Respite in Orleans (a cognitive day facility at the Orleans Senior Center), the Alzheimer's Family Resource Center in the Cape Cod Mall, schools in Falmouth, Harwich, Chatham, and Dennis, Cape Cod Hospital, the Terraces

Nursing Home in Orleans, and several libraries throughout the Cape. They can often be found at the Eastham and Provincetown library locations, the ARC of Upper Cape Cod, and the AIM Wellness Center in Wellfleet, among other public venues and locations where people can benefit from spending time with these sensitive souls. "It's just really amazing to see how intuitive the dogs are," Usowski shares.

One study by Johns Hopkins Medical revealed that dogs help to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, and contribute to lowering blood pressure through cortisol-lowering and oxytocin-boosting benefits. These dogs can also bring consolation to people who are going through difficult times. Usowski recalls a time when the comfort dogs visited a local school and one of the dogs seemingly made a beeline toward one of the students, immediately bonding with the child. It was later that one of the school staff members shared with the Hearts and Paws volunteers

that the student had recently suffered an immense loss—making it all the more special that the dog sought that particular student out and provided much-needed comfort and love.

All of the dogs involved are specially trained for the important jobs that they are brought to. In order to certify a dog as a therapy dog, one first needs to ensure that your dog has basic obedience training and though it isn't a prerequisite to Therapy Certification, many choose to also take the



Willie and her handler spread joy and comfort







American Kennel Club's (AKC) Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. HPCD only requires the CGC, but do encourage members to take the extra step and become therapy certified as well. In order to visit hospitals, dogs must be therapy certified, but most other venues only require the CGC.

These dogs are inherently special by nature, but these additional levels of formal training ensure that they can provide emotional support to individuals in the various settings to which they are brought. Hearts and Paws does not provide the required training but through their extensive network of contacts, they can connect owners and their pets to skilled trainers who can provide you with the information on how to fulfill the necessary requirements and get your pet on track to become certified.

Not all the people associated with the nonprofit are even dog owners, however, some of them perform the important role of a spotter. Co-vince president of HPCD, Rebecca Blair, notes that spotters are the "unsung heroes of comfort visits." By definition, in either gymnastics, weightlifting or aviation for





example, a spotter is one who assists and provides support. HPCD uses the term however, to describe the special role that is needed at visits to provide the dog's handler with dedicated assistance. A spotter takes part in every interaction that HPCD schedules and plays a crucial role for both the comfort dog, the handler and the people they interact with during a visit. They help manage the environment (make sure the floor is free of food or medications) monitor the dog's behavior and provide support to prevent any potential stress or discomfort for either the dog, the handler, or the individuals receiving support. Another unique system that HPCD has in place is that a minimum of two dogs attend each visit. Usowski says, "We find that no matter how friendly and lovable and people oriented our dogs are, they always feel a little more comfortable having another dog with them."

There really is no exact recipe for what makes a comfort and/or therapy dog—no specific breed that is more suited to the role. Usowski believes it's the deep connection and trust between a dog and its owner that supersedes any other possible factors and ultimately, that the dog must genuinely love all people, and enjoy being around other animals.



As is always the case with a nonprofit organization, many hands make light work. Usowski shares, "We have an incredible team of directors and officers, and we are very active. To be part of our organization, you can't be a silent member. We're very engaged. We have a lot of roles; a treasurer, an events committee, regional coordinators for visits, people who are well-versed in technology, someone who coordinates orientation—it's all incredible."

Although the costs to run the nonprofit are relatively low as they are all volunteers with their own dogs, their fundraising efforts—selflessly—go directly to support other local organizations such as Dream Day on Cape

Cod, the Family Pantry, Tommy's Place, and the Sampson Fund for Veterinary Care.

The goal of HPCD is a simple one: to spread love. "We see just how big of a difference kindness makes every single time that we go into the visits. We're always looking for more people to spread even more love to those in need because the need is just so great. There's plenty of service for us all to be doing here," Usowski opines. 🐾

Visit the HPCD website at [heartsandpawscomfortdogs.org](http://heartsandpawscomfortdogs.org) to read their latest newsletter and learn more about how you can get involved.

*Leslie Hatton is the editor of Cape Cod LIFE.*

