

LEE LI MING  
PROGRAMME IN  
AGEING URBANISM

# Improving Senior Mobility with Animal Activities

## The Purrs for Heart Programme<sup>1</sup>

Francine Chan Wen Xin

Animal-assisted programmes and therapy have been established as useful and relatively safe forms of activity for people with various health conditions, e.g., psychiatric disorders, paediatric care for acute or chronic conditions, senior palliative care, advanced chronic disorders and Alzheimer's disease. Animal-assisted programmes involve structured activities with animals to improve participants' quality of life through interaction and companionship, while animal-assisted therapy uses trained animals guided by professionals to achieve specific health, emotional, or social goals, and enhance overall well-being and recovery. These treatments have been found to promote multiple benefits such as reducing stress, pain, anxiety and aggressive behaviours. Findings also show improvements in vital signs such as heart and respiratory rates for patients in long-term care.<sup>2</sup>

This note presents an update on notable animal-assisted programmes and therapy

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<sup>1</sup> This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

<sup>2</sup> Bert, F., Gualano, M. R., Camussi, E., Pieve, G., Voglino, G., & Siliquini, R. (2016). Animal-assisted intervention: A systematic review of benefits and

risks. *European Journal of Integrative Medicine*, 8(5), 695–706.

developments in Singapore<sup>3</sup> to provide an overview of current programmes, with a particular focus on the newly introduced cat-therapy initiative, Purrs for Heart.

## Addressing Frailty Through Animal-Assisted Therapy

A pet-therapy trial was conducted in 2004 with cats for institutionalised frail elderly patients over six weeks, with three one-hour sessions per week. This was conducted in a nursing home in Torin, Italy. Findings showed improvement in depressive symptoms and blood pressure, highlighting the potential of cat-assisted activity programmes as part of the multidisciplinary treatments of frail elderly patients in long-term care.<sup>4</sup> Other findings also show that the desire for animal-assisted therapy is strongly linked with previous pet ownership and reduces loneliness in residents of long-term care facilities.<sup>5</sup>

Despite extensive medical trials supporting the use of therapy animals for seniors in care facilities, there have been limited instances in Singapore where cat-therapy activities are facilitated. Purrs for Heart is the first of such structured pilot initiative in Singapore, launched in June

2023 and running through December 2023 with ongoing plans for expansion as of June 2024. As covered in the LKYCIC Ageing Urbanism Note 13 -- Animal Assistance for Seniors, existing animal therapy programmes are limited to dogs, making it inaccessible to people who are unable to interact with dogs for religious reasons.

Ongoing dog-therapy programmes also remain limited in Singapore. As of June 2024, there is one long-term programme, Healing Paws, organised by SoSD based on community-based dog owner recruitment and another community-based initiative, the Sayang Squad (Box 1), which was started in 2019 by a group of pet owners. This makes the coordination of long-term programmes dependent on community volunteers.

### NTUC Health Animal Therapy

In view of the health and wellbeing benefits of animal-assisted programmes and therapy, NTUC Health has been working with community partners to incorporate this practice in their senior home programmes since 2019. Their programmes range from performances by volunteer groups such as the Sayang Squad, Purrs for Hearts structured animal-assisted therapy with Wildflowers

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<sup>3</sup> Notes on Recreation Note 13 – Animal Assistance for Seniors, which featured Animal-Assisted Activities and AAT; Note 14 – Animals Living with Seniors covers the growing number of programmes targeted at providing seniors at home and at assisted living centres with incentives and opportunities to live with animals for companionship and wellbeing benefits.

<sup>4</sup> Stasi, M. F., Amati, D., Costa, C., Resta, D., Senepa, G., Scarafioiti, C., Aimonino, N., &

Molaschi, M. (2004). Pet-therapy: A trial for institutionalized frail elderly patients. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics. Supplement*, 9, 407–412.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, M. R., & Banks, W. A. (2002). The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Loneliness in an Elderly Population in Long-Term Care Facilities. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series A*, 57(7), M428–M432.

Studio (detailed in next section) and excursions where seniors get opportunities to feed, groom and interact with horses in stables in the EQUAL programme.

### Box 1: Sayang Squad



*Sayang Squad performance at NTUC Health nursing homes (Image source: The Straits Times )*

Sayang Squad is a community volunteer programme which brings together dog owners for monthly visits to nursing homes to perform tricks, entertain and interact with seniors. Volunteers met through the obedience training school for their dogs. The dogs are assessed by the trainers to be suitable as therapy animals, e.g., their sociable temperament, gentle nature and ability to obey basic commands to ensure a safe experience for all.

Source: NTUC Health. (2023). Build an Ageless Community With Us [Annual Report]. <https://assets-prod.ntuhealth.sg/nh/Annex-C-Annual-Report-for-the-Financial-Year-ended-31-December-2023.pdf>; Ang, S. (2023, June 18). Dancing dogs bring cheer to nursing home residents. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/dancing-dogs-bring-cheer-to-nursing-home-residents>

The following sections deep-dive to better understand how the cat-assisted

therapy—Purrs for Hearts—is operated and what it takes to facilitate and sustain the programme long-term.

## Purrs for Heart Programme

### *Initiation*

Purrs for Hearts is a pilot programme launched by Wildflower Studio (Box 2) on June 28, 2023. It was held monthly between June to December of 2023 at two locations of NTUC Health Nursing Home (Jurong West and Chai Chee). This programme is designed for elderly residents with severe mobility issues such as those who are stroke victims, amputees or bed bound.

In an interview by *The Straits Times*, senior physiotherapist Ms Siti Zubaidah at the Chai Chee home said that cats can play a role when residents are afraid or unable to interact with large animals or are unable to interact with dogs for religious reasons (*The Straits Times*, 11 July 2023). Further, interacting with these cats can improve joint mobility and act as strengthening exercises when carried out in physiotherapy sessions. Residents reacted positively towards the sessions, as petting, feeding and even watching the cats act as inclusive activities for those with dementia and limited mobility.

### Box 2: Wildflower Studio

Wildflower studio is a cat rescue and rehabilitation studio founded in 2021. Its activities include:



*Art jamming session with cats – art materials provided to participants alongside cat toys. (image source: Wildflower Studio)*

**Art Jam with Cats** combines art sessions for all ages with interactions with rescued cats. These sessions focus on cat education and serve to socialise and showcase the cats for adoption.

**Wildflower Academy** fosters, rehabilitates and rehomes community cats. The aim is to promote responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. As such, they offer educational programmes and materials to raise awareness on the importance of spaying/neutering, vaccinations and proper care of cats.



Purrs for Hearts AAT programme for seniors at NTUC Health nursing homes (image source: Wildflower Studio)

**Cat Assisted Activity** runs pilot programmes such as Purrs for Hearts to support the well-being and mobility of seniors at NTUC Health Nursing Homes; and Just Fur Fun, an animal-assisted care programme run by SHINE that aims to provide mental support for youths aged 15 to 25.

Source: Wildflower Studio. (2024). Wildflower Studio.

## *Implementation*

Wildflower Studio actively engages with local communities through outreach events, co-creation programmes and partnerships with like-minded organisations to elevate the status of community rescue cats. The Purrs for Heart Programme was initiated by NTUC Health when they approached the studio if they would be open to bringing cats to the nursing home.

The overall pilot structure consists of fortnightly sessions run by studio owners and their volunteers which includes 15

rescue cats and 12-15 residents. Working with a physiotherapist, Purr for Hearts provides a structured programme which makes physical therapy an engaging activity for senior residents. Residents engage in active involvement of their upper limbs and neck through activities that tasked them to feed, pet and reach for the cats. Healthier residents have the opportunity to carry the cats to engage their upper limb muscles. Therapists also create programmes for seniors who are bed bound, by focusing on sensory stimulation by placing cats on their laps. This programme is on a voluntary basis, but transport was supported by Volkswagen Singapore.

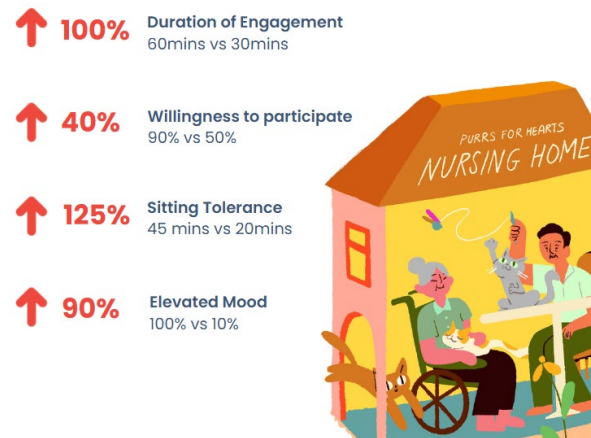
### Impact

Purrs for Heart demonstrated great potential in improving the engagement and overall wellbeing of senior residents. Noted improvements included a 100% increase in senior physical therapy engagement time as residents were previously reluctant to engage in regular traditional therapy. There is a 40% increase in participation rates. By the end of the 6-month programme, seniors involved had a 125% increase in sitting tolerance and a 90% increase in elevated moods (Figure 1).

Due to the success of this programme, Wildflower Studio plans to expand their animal-assisted programmes to include other vulnerable groups. Future collaborations will include a programme at the Institute of Mental Health dementia ward commencing 20 June 2024 which aims to have their research team on board to examine the impacts of feline-assisted therapy for dementia patients. Stroke

Support Station (S3) will also be working with the studio to pilot a new feline-assisted activity programme titled Kit-Fit, which will include varying levels of physical activities to engage with cats to gradually improve the overall physical mobility of stroke patients.

Figure 1. Impact measurement of Purrs for Heart.

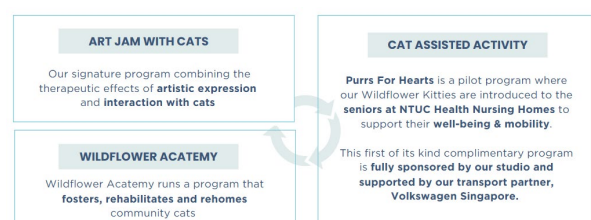


Source: Wildflower Studio

### Support Structure

The overall structure of Wildflower Studio runs on a virtuous cycle of community support where community volunteers and fosterers help rescue and look after these cats (Figure 2). They raise funds through public art jamming sessions which simultaneously act as a platform to socialise their rescued cats. Once socialised, these cats will then be enrolled in animal-assisted programmes and therapy for community engagement.

Figure 2: Wildflower Studio Support Structure



Source: Wildflower Studio

Partnerships with corporations are developed. For example, Volkswagen Singapore have donated a car to facilitate the transportation of their cats to nursing homes and other community engagement events. Another is with Atlas Veterinary Clinic and Surgery on cat rescue cases. All rescued cats are brought for general health screenings, regularly vaccinated, and checked to be free from mites, fleas, ticks and ringworm. The cats all go through a quarantine period of two weeks when rescued, and sterilised once they are of age and reasonably practical.

Due to the nature of their community programmes, Wildflower Studio works to ensure safe, sustainable, ethical and meaningful practices. All members of staff and volunteers are trained to ensure the safety and wellbeing of participants and their cats. They supervise and intervene if any behaviour poses a risk to safety and comfort. Accordingly, their animal-assisted programmes and therapy activities are structured to respect the nature of cats and their environmental and behavioural needs.

## Conclusion

The Purrs for Heart programme marks a significant step in Singapore's animal-assisted programme and therapy landscape, which has been enabled by several key factors:

- A supportive volunteer-based ecosystem to facilitate manpower.
- Sustainable financing from Wildflower Studio and their partners such as Atlas Veterinary Clinic and Surgery. Additional

sponsorship by Volkswagen addresses the issue of financing transport.

- Strong reception and facilitation of programmes by NTUC Health and other healthcare providers such as the Institute of Mental Health, and healthcare professionals guiding the therapy and future research.

The number and scale of animal-assisted programmes and therapy in Singapore is still greatly limited. This is due to the lack of structured organisations or publicly available funding sources – with most, if not all initiatives being self-supported and funded. Kit-fit is the first study internationally to design specific long-term physical therapy programmes involving felines. There is potential for these pilot programmes to contribute to more in-depth research and understanding of what it takes to run such programmes, and their long term healthcare benefits.

Sources:

NTUC Health. (2023). Build an Ageless Community With Us [Annual Report]. <https://assets-prod.ntuchealth.sg/nh/Annex-C-Annual-Report-for-the-Financial-Year-ended-31-December-2023.pdf>

Ang, S. (2023, June 18). Dancing dogs bring cheer to nursing home residents. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/dancing-dogs-bring-cheer-to-nursing-home-residents>

Ang, S. (2023, July 11). Practice makes purrfect: Cats help nursing home residents improve their mobility. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/practice-makes-purrfect-cats-help-nursing-home-residents-improve-their-mobility>

Wildflower Studio. (2024). Wildflower Studio