

A Foundation for Care of Elderly Dogs

Ronald Lagoe^{1*}, Meghan Slanina², Lauren Passantino³, Christine Berry⁴ and Alyssa Chandler²

¹The Ruthie Foundation, Syracuse, New York, USA

²Cornell University Hospital for Animals, Ithaca, New York, USA

³Fairmount Animal Hospital, Syracuse, New York, USA

⁴Liverpool Animal Health Center, Liverpool, New York, USA

Commentary

Received date: 18/11/2016

Accepted date: 25/12/2016

Published date: 30/12/2016

*For Correspondence

Ronald Lagoe, PhD, The Ruthie Foundation
Syracuse, New York, USA,
Tel: 001-315 464 4368

E-mail: hospexcl@cnymail.com

Keywords: Dogs, Elderly dogs, Veterinary,
Care

ABSTRACT

This narrative describes a small foundation which was developed to support the care of elderly dogs. It provides a website with information that is helpful to owners of elderly dogs. It also provides limited financial payments to assist owners with the costs of medications, tests, and veterinary care. The Foundation has supported the care of 15 elderly dogs during its initial 24 months. These dogs have ranged in age from 10 to 18 years and have been supported by the Foundation from 4 to 22 months.

INTRODUCTION

During the past several decades, interest in addressing the needs of elderly human populations has increased. This has been accompanied, to a lesser extent, by a rise in interest concerning the health care needs of elderly dogs.

Attention to the care needs of elderly dogs has developed in recent years from general literature and activities concerning veterinary care. Specific areas that have been addressed in the literature include anesthesiology, neurology, orthopedics and nutrition. Some of this research involves useful comparisons of the needs of elderly dogs with those of younger animals ^[1-6].

Literature and general discussion concerning the care needs of elderly dogs has generated opportunities to address this subject. These opportunities relate to providing information to caregivers including clinical data, financial support, and other areas of care.

THE ORGANIZATION

This study describes the organization and operation of a Foundation that supports the care of elderly dogs. The Foundation was named for Ruthie, a black and tan miniature dachshund who lived to be more than 20 years old by overcoming numerous obstacles. These included episodes of acute pancreatitis, disc disease, anaphylactic shock, orthopedic disorders and mast cell.

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) not for profit corporation under the Internal Revenue Service and the New York Department of State. It is overseen by a Board of Directors that includes four veterinarians and laypersons who are dog owners. The Foundation's activities are carried out by volunteers and the dog owners that it supports. The organization has no paid staff.

The Ruthie Foundation is described in its main website, theruthiefoundation.com. This website includes an email address for communication with the organization, a mechanism for contributing to its activities, and other information.

The Ruthie Foundation is different from many other animal support organizations in two important respects. It focuses only on elderly dogs. It also provides support for continuing care rather than episodic services such as adoptions.

Foundation revenues are obtained from contributions from the public. Donations can be made online by credit card through the organization's main website, theruthiefoundation.com. Contributions can also be made by mail to the address provided on the website. In the initial two years of operation, Foundation revenues amounted to \$9,750 – \$14,251 per year.

Start up costs for the Foundation in the initial year of operation amounted to \$ 1,900. Most of these costs resulted from legal fees related to the incorporation and the tax exempt application which were provided by a local law firm at a substantial discount.

Foundation expenses, excluding start up costs, during the initial two years of operation of the Foundation have ranged from \$9,719 to \$15,251 per year. Of these expenses, 96 percent per year were used for direct support of client dogs including veterinary visits, medications, and laboratory tests. The remaining expenses, which included website and bank statement costs, were kept to minimal levels through the use of volunteer staff.

With respect to Foundation expenses, the organization controls payments for the support of elderly dogs by providing this funding through veterinarians. This mechanism is useful because the cost of the visits, medications, and laboratory tests are channeled through veterinary practices. The veterinarians are also responsible in assuring that the dogs are being cared for appropriately through periodic visits. Oversight and review of the use of Foundation expenses is provided by a volunteer Board of Directors including four veterinarians and two dog owners.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Within this context, the Ruthie Foundation provides two types of support. The first is information to assist caregivers of elderly dogs through a website and referrals to knowledgeable specialists. The second is limited financial assistance for medications, tests and some therapies.

In order to provide information to assist caregivers of elderly dogs, the Ruthie Foundation developed an informational website www.careforgeriatricdogs.com. This website was developed by veterinarians board certified in a number of areas of canine medicine including anesthesiology, arthritis management, dentistry, gastroenterology, neurology, nutrition, oncology and canine cognitive dysfunction. For each of these conditions, the website provides descriptions of the condition, suggestions for management by caregivers, and other information. A link to this website is provided on the Foundation website www.theruthiefoundation.com.

The Foundation also provides limited financial assistance to owners of elderly dogs who need help paying for their care. Such assistance can cover medications, diagnostic tests, prescription diets, and veterinary care. Because this assistance is provided on an ongoing basis, its availability has been limited. Funds from the Foundation are distributed through veterinarians, who provide information concerning the costs of visits, medication, and tests for elderly dogs.

Most clients have been identified through veterinarians. Owners can also initiate contacts with the Foundation through their veterinarians. The application process involves identification of the medical needs of dogs and the ability of owners to provide payment. This information is identified through direct communication between veterinarians and the Foundation staff.

In its initial two years of operation, The Ruthie Foundation has provided support for 15 elderly dogs. Almost all of these dogs reside with their owners in the metropolitan area of Syracuse, New York, where the organization is located.

UTILIZATION

The elderly dogs supported financially by the Ruthie Foundation during its initial two years have been referred by their owners through the main website or by their veterinarians. All of them have had limited funds for veterinary care and related expenses.

The dogs supported by the Foundation during this period have represented a wide variety of breeds. These included 3 dachshunds, 3 terriers, 2 lhasa apsos, 2 poodles, 1 boxer, 1 labrador retriever, 1 pit bull, 1 German shepherd, and 1 shih Tzu.

The following information summarizes the age distribution of dogs and lengths of stay within the Foundation during its initial two years (**Table 1**).

Table 1. This information indicated that the program served dogs ranging from 10-18 years old.

The Ruthie Foundation			
Client Utilization			
Number of Dogs		Dogs by Lengths of Support	
10-11 Years Old	3	3-4 Months	5
12 Years Old	4	6 Months	4
14 Years Old	2	12-14 Months	4
15 Years Old	4	18 Months	1
17 Years Old	1	22 Months	1
18 Years Old	1		
Total	15	Total	15

Most (60 percent of the dogs) were aged 10 – 14 years of age. Two of them were aged 17 – 18 years old. This population of elderly dogs was consistent with Ruthie’s age, 20 years and 7 months.

These data also indicated that the dogs were supported by the Foundation for periods ranging from 3 to 22 months. Six of them were still under Foundation support in July 2016. One was withdrawn when his owner no longer needed the funding. The remaining eight expired.

Examples of individual dogs supported by The Ruthie Foundation follow.

Chadwick was a miniature dachshund who lived to be 17 years old. He experienced kidney insufficiency and nutritional disorders. Chadwick's owner was a retired hospital nurse who administered intravenous fluids and prescription diets to him. The Ruthie Foundation supported them with funds for medications, supplies, prescription diets, intravenous therapy and veterinary care for a 12-month period before he expired. Without this support, his owner would not have been able to provide this care.

Yoann is a 15 year old Labrador retriever. She experiences pain in her joints and has bladder issues. Yoann's owner is disabled and on a limited income. She provides extensive care for Yoann on a daily basis. The Ruthie Foundation has supported them with funds for pain medications, prescription diets, laboratory tests, and veterinary care for 24 months.

Harley was a 14 year old dachshund. He experienced skin conditions and nutritional disorders. Harley's owners were a retired couple with a limited income. The Ruthie Foundation supported them with funds for medications, a prescription diet, and veterinary appointments for 8 months until he expired.

Scrappy was a 12 year old boxer who experienced pain related to seizures and arthritis. His owner was a young person with two part time jobs and a limited income. The Ruthie Foundation supported them with funds for medication (dermax) for five months before he expired.

The initial two years of Foundation activities have focused on gaining experience in providing assistance for care of elderly dogs and development of mechanisms to support this project. From this standpoint, the modest levels of Foundation revenues and expenses have been useful in initiating development of the organization.

Potential goals of the Foundation that have been discussed within the Board of Directors are focusing on increasing resources to approximately \$20,000 per year through grants and other sources of funding. Reaching these goals would enable the Foundation to expand the scope of care for elderly dogs beyond current levels. It would also make it possible for the Foundation to support other activities, such as therapies that improve the quality of life of elderly dogs.

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