

Chickens are therapeutic at senior communities



An innovative program encourages social interaction and reduces isolation among the elderly.

The HenPower project offers a new approach to improving senior living. It has been helping residents in selected senior care facilities to raise hens, design chicken coops, and educate schoolchildren about animals.

Most animal-assisted intervention programs involve companion animals (dogs, cats, or rabbits) visiting facilities. This project offers a different kind of pet therapy, one that allows residents to become more involved in the animals' lives.

The pilot program was launched in 2012 by Equal Arts, a British creative aging non-profit. With 1000 British pounds (about \$16,000), HenPower was a trial program in a dementia-care setting in Gateshead, near Newcastle. The participating residents, called "hensioners," provided day-to-day care of the hens, their eggs, and chicks, and recorded oral histories of their experience and designed cards, calendars, and other hen-inspired artwork.

The project encouraged residents to engage with the animals and with other participants, with the aim to prevent loneliness and isolation, two common afflictions of those in senior and dementia care. Hens were catalysts for all kinds of activity. Increased creativity, health, and

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outdoor physical activity were benefits of the pilot program.

Jos Forester-Melville, HenPower's program manager, tells *New York* magazine in a recent interview that the project "is not animal-assisted therapy, but the building of human bonds, making friends through hens and creativity. We write songs and poems about our feathered friends; we design sculptures and collages." Hens serve as artist models during creative sessions led by volunteer artists and musicians. Older people go through a lot of loss. But one thing that lasts, even in dementia patients, is their creativity.

Some of the hensioners participate in Hen Road Shows, where they take hens out to other care facilities, schools, and health conferences.

A 12-month study of the pilot program was conducted by Northumbria University; its published report in 2014 found that HenPower improved the health and well-being of the small group of older people involved, reduced depression and loneliness, and decreased the need for anti-psychotic medications.

In a *BT* e-mail exchange, Forester-Melville writes that since 2012, HenPower applied for National Lottery funding of one million pounds and has rolled out the project to 60 care facilities and schools in the United Kingdom, three senior care communities in Holland, two in Taiwan, and twenty in Australia.

In New South Wales, Australia, HenPower was adapted from the British project and run by the Whiddon Group, which introduced HenPower in four of its residential aged care homes. There were early indications of increased quality of life scores among participating residents.

As reported by the Australian publication *Mindfood*: "This six-month trial beginning in December 2015 has shown numerous health and well-being benefits, significant reduction of depression, reduction of loneliness, and the empowerment of older people to build positive relationships."

The trial's final report reveals three important benefits for the residents who participated in the HenPower project: empowerment, connection, and health and well-being. Today HenPower is

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at most of Whiddon's 19 residential aged care homes.

Shared ownership of the chickens and responsibility for their care give the seniors daily, purposeful routines, good distraction from boredom, and feelings of independence.

According to Jeremy Watson-Hunt, a Whiddon activities director, HenPower benefits those with dementia symptoms. "It gives them a sense of purpose. They've got someone to talk to, to hold, and to care for, and it does make a big difference," he says. Strong bonds are formed between the residents and individual chickens. Touching the animals gives relief from stress, and their care promotes increased outdoor activity for the seniors.

Karn Nelson, executive general manager of strategy and research with the Whiddon Group, says that HenPower "has given the residents a whole new focus. These are people who would normally be sitting in their rooms alone and they would be very difficult to get out of their rooms." Not only are they now getting out of their rooms and outside to the coops, but they are doing outreach at local schools with goodwill ambassador chickens.

In one HenPower video, a hensioner notes, "It's definitely brought the community closer together."

Another hensioner confesses, "I used to stay in bed and say to myself, 'What do I have to get up for?' If you're feeling a bit down in the dumps, you can always come around the coops and have a talk with the hens. It sounds daft, but they listen."

The Equal Arts charity has plans to expand the HenPower project to 24 additional care settings in the U.K. and has received an extra 244,000 pounds of government funding to do just that.

"Our project isn't yet in the United States," Forester-Melville tells the *BT*, "but we'd be keen to set one up. We provide an international license that offers access to our model and resources, and 24/7 online support."

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What's Miami waiting for? For information: www.equalarts.org.uk.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com