

**March 2024**



**Submission to the  
Australian Government  
on the New Aged Care Act**



Greyhound Rescue appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the proposed new Aged Care Act. Our submission focuses on acknowledging and amplifying pets' profound impact on enhancing older individuals' well-being. Pets play a crucial role in the lives of many elderly Australians by providing companionship and emotional support, promoting physical activity, and fostering social inclusion. This submission seeks to ensure that the new Aged Care Act recognises and supports the integration of pets into aged care settings.

Numerous studies have documented the positive effects of pet ownership and interaction on older adults' physical and mental health. Pets offer companionship that can significantly reduce loneliness and isolation, which are prevalent among older people. The presence of pets has been linked to lower blood pressure, reduced stress levels, and increased physical activity, all of which contribute to a healthier and more vibrant lifestyle for older adults.

Moreover, pets provide a sense of purpose and routine, which are vital for maintaining mental health. They also promote social interaction and connectivity, serving as a social bridge to other pet owners and community members. This interaction is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and community among older individuals, which is critical for their well-being.

### **Recommendations for Incorporating Pets into the New Aged Care Act**

1. **Policy Development and Implementation:** Develop and implement policies that encourage and facilitate the inclusion of pets in residential aged care facilities. This could include guidelines on pet ownership, visitation programs, and the establishment of pet-friendly spaces within facilities.
2. **Support for Pet Ownership:** Recognise the therapeutic benefits of pets and support pet ownership among older individuals receiving home-based care. This support could include financial assistance for pet care expenses, such as veterinary bills, to ensure that older adults do not have to give up their pets due to financial constraints.
3. **Pet-Friendly Design Standards:** Incorporate pet-friendly design standards in the construction and renovation of aged care facilities. This could involve creating safe outdoor spaces for pets and their owners to enjoy and indoor areas where pets can interact with residents.
4. **Education and Training:** Provide education and training for aged care staff on the benefits of human-animal interactions and how to safely incorporate pets into care plans. This training can help staff support pet ownership and interaction in a way that benefits both the residents and the pets.
5. **Research and Evaluation:** Support research into the benefits of pet ownership and interaction in aged care settings. This research can inform best practices and highlight the value of pets in enhancing the quality of life for older Australians.
6. **Fund Greyhound Rescue's Hounds Helping Humans Program:** The Australian Federal Government should provide dedicated funding to support Greyhound Rescue's "Hounds Helping Humans" program. This innovative initiative fosters positive interactions between rescued greyhounds and older individuals in aged care settings, offering emotional support and companionship to enhance the well-being of elderly residents. Funding would expand the program, allowing more aged care facilities to participate and more rescued greyhounds to find a meaningful role in the community.

In response to the Australian Government's consultation paper on the Aged Care Act, we advocate for integrating pet ownership into the aged care regulatory system and policies. The necessity of supporting pet companionship in home and residential care settings for older people is underlined by the mutual benefits for older individuals and their pets in maintaining these relationships, including financial support.

Greyhound Rescue strongly supports the Aged Care Draft Bill and Consultation Paper's inclusion of pets in the definition of "high-quality care" and the right to maintain a connection with pets. We suggest further integrating this recognition into the Act's principles and providing funding for in-home and out-of-home care facilities' pet services. This would ensure pets are considered in the planning for social support, medical treatment, and accommodation for older people, reflecting the extensive evidence on the benefits of pet ownership.

### **Pets and People's Health**

The positive health effects of pets on people, especially seniors, are increasingly supported by scientific research, demonstrating a wide range of benefits that contribute to physical and mental well-being. Engaging with pets has been linked to numerous health improvements, including reduced blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and triglyceride levels, as well as decreased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and symptoms of PTSD. For older adults, the companionship of pets has also been associated with increased opportunities for exercise and outdoor activities, improved cognitive function, and more opportunities for social interaction, reducing the risk of heart disease and decreasing doctor visits.

Research highlights that pets can significantly enhance seniors' quality of life, providing vital social and emotional support that alleviates distress and loneliness. This support can lead to less depression among older adults with a solid attachment to their pets. Beyond pet ownership, animal-assisted interventions (AAI), including animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted therapy (AAT), offer structured ways for seniors to interact with animals, further promoting their physical and emotional health.

Animals bring innate qualities such as attention, intention, compassion, and awareness—critical components of mindfulness that humans often strive to achieve. This natural propensity of animals to offer unconditional support and acceptance can be particularly beneficial in therapeutic settings, helping people with ADHD focus their attention, improving social skills and cooperation, and reducing behavioural problems. Similarly, people with autism spectrum disorder show decreased anxiety levels and improved social interactions when involved in supervised playtime with animals like guinea pigs.

Moreover, pets have been found to help manage chronic conditions such as diabetes by encouraging more disciplined monitoring of blood glucose levels through pet care. This indicates that the benefits of pet interaction extend to better self-management of health conditions.

While pets offer many health benefits, it is essential to consider the responsibilities and potential risks associated with pet ownership. Proper hygiene practices and understanding pets' needs and stress signals are crucial for a healthy relationship between pets and their owners.

The growing body of evidence supporting the health benefits of pets highlights the need for further research into human-animal interactions. Understanding the mechanisms behind these benefits can help design programs and interventions that enhance the well-being of both pets and their owners, contributing to healthier communities.

## Scientific Evidence on Benefits of Pets for Seniors

- **Reduced Loneliness and Depression:** A study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that pet owners had improved self-esteem, were more physically fit, and tended to be less lonely than non-owners (McConnell et al., 2011).
- **Lower Blood Pressure and Stress Levels:** Research in the Journal of Behavioural Medicine showed that pet ownership was associated with lower blood pressure and heart rate responses to stress (Allen et al., 2002).
- **Increased Physical Activity:** A study in the Journal of Physical Activity & Health revealed that dog owners are likelier to achieve recommended physical activity levels than non-owners (Reeves et al., 2011).
- **Social Interaction Enhancement:** As noted in a study in the Journal of Social Issues (Wood et al., 2007), pets can act as social catalysts, encouraging interactions and helping to build community networks.

## About Greyhound Rescue

Greyhound Rescue is a notable non-profit organisation dedicated to the welfare of greyhounds. It focuses on rescuing, rehabilitating, and rehoming these graceful dogs that have retired from the racing industry or need a loving home. Established with a profound commitment to animal welfare, Greyhound Rescue addresses the urgent need for a safe haven for greyhounds, offering them a second chance at life in loving, permanent homes.

The organisation operates on the principles of compassion and respect for all greyhounds, recognising the breed's gentle nature and suitability as family pets. Greyhound Rescue's activities encompass a comprehensive approach to rescue, including veterinary care, fostering, socialisation, and adoption services. These efforts ensure that each greyhound receives medical treatment, love, and care to recover from past lives and seamlessly transition into its new home.

One of Greyhound Rescue's unique aspects is its Hounds Helping Humans program. This initiative highlights the therapeutic potential of greyhounds by facilitating their visits to aged care facilities. This program demonstrates the positive impact greyhounds can have on human well-being, especially among seniors and individuals living with dementia, offering companionship and joy to those who may benefit most from the gentle presence of these dogs.

Greyhound Rescue relies on the support of volunteers, donations, and community engagement to sustain its mission. Through awareness campaigns and educational efforts, the organisation also advocates for the breed, aiming to change public perceptions and promote the adoption of greyhounds as loving pet companions.

### Greyhound Rescue's Hounds Helping Humans Program

The Hounds Helping Humans program, initiated by Greyhound Rescue in partnership with HammondCare, aims to enhance the lives of aged care residents, particularly those with dementia. This innovative program is Australia's first of its kind, leveraging the unique qualities of rescued greyhounds to offer companionship and emotional support to older people.

Greyhounds are chosen for their calm and gentle nature, making them ideal companions for individuals in aged care environments. Their tall stature allows them to easily interact with people in wheelchairs or those confined to beds. The program entails regular visits from teams composed of a hound and a handler, specifically trained to navigate the unique challenges of an aged care setting.

This includes familiarisation with the various sounds, sights, and equipment they will encounter, ensuring a safe and enriching experience for the residents and the greyhounds.

The collaboration between Greyhound Rescue and HammondCare emerged from a shared recognition of the therapeutic benefits that animals can bring to people, particularly those facing the challenges of aging and dementia. Research has demonstrated that interactions with dogs can significantly reduce agitation and improve mood among dementia patients, offering a non-pharmacological approach to enhancing their quality of life.

Beyond the immediate joy and companionship these visits provide, the program also serves a larger purpose by giving rescued greyhounds a meaningful role in the community. This aligns with Greyhound Rescue's mission of saving these beautiful animals and enabling them to contribute positively to society.

The Hounds Helping Humans program, supported by a grant from Australian Ethical, underscores the potential of innovative, compassionate initiatives to impact the well-being of aged care residents significantly. It represents a promising model for how animal-assisted therapy can be integrated into care settings to support emotional health and social interaction among older people.

This program enriches the lives of its human participants and offers rescued greyhounds a loving and purposeful engagement, embodying a beautiful synergy between human and animal welfare.

### **Funding Hounds Helping Humans**

The Hounds Helping Humans program, an innovative initiative by Greyhound Rescue in collaboration with HammondCare, offers a compelling case for federal government funding in the aged care sector in Australia. This unique program leverages the therapeutic potential of rescued greyhounds to improve the well-being of aged care residents, particularly those living with dementia, through regular, interactive visits. The rationale for government support of this program is multifaceted. Firstly, the program aligns with the Federal Government's responsibility to provide high-quality aged care services that cater to the diverse needs of Australia's ageing population. The program offers a practical, non-pharmacological approach to enhancing residents' quality of life by integrating animal-assisted therapy into aged care. Studies have shown that interactions with dogs can significantly reduce depression, agitation, and loneliness among older people while encouraging physical activity and social interaction.

Secondly, the program gives greyhounds a valuable second chance, repurposing their lives to meaningful community service. This addresses animal welfare concerns and contributes to the societal value of empathy and care for all beings. Moreover, the initial success and positive feedback from residents and the staff involved in the Hounds Helping Humans program highlight its potential scalability and impact nationwide. With federal funding, the program could be expanded to more aged care facilities, reaching a more significant segment of the elderly population and potentially reducing the overall healthcare costs associated with managing dementia-related symptoms and elderly depression.

Funding this program would demonstrate the Government's support for community-led initiatives that address public health issues in creative and effective ways. It would set a precedent for public-private partnerships and encourage further innovation in the aged care sector. Investing in such programs aligns with broader public health goals of improving mental health and well-being among older people, showcasing the Government's dedication to holistic and preventative healthcare strategies. It is an opportunity to foster a more compassionate, innovative, and holistic approach to aged care, emphasising the undeniable link between human and animal well-being.

## **Integration of Pet Care Education within Aged Care Training Programs**

It is imperative to include pet care education in aged care workers' training programs to ensure that they are well-prepared to support the integration of pets into aged care settings. This initiative aims to equip caregivers with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage pets effectively, fostering a safe and enriching environment for both pets and their owners.

The aged care training program curriculum should include modules on primary pet care, understanding animal behaviour, and recognising pet health issues. These modules could cover essential topics such as nutritional needs, exercise requirements, signs of stress or discomfort in pets, and primary animal first aid. Additionally, training should emphasise the importance of pets in enhancing the well-being of older individuals, highlighting the positive impacts of pet companionship on physical and mental health.

This recommendation also calls for ongoing professional development opportunities focused on pet care for existing aged care staff. Workshops, seminars, and online courses could offer caregivers updates on best practices in pet management and share new research findings on the benefits of human-animal interactions.

Implementing pet care education within aged care training programs requires collaboration between educational institutions, care providers, and animal welfare experts. This collaboration could involve developing standardised training materials, conducting pilot programs to refine the curriculum, and establishing certification processes to recognise the competencies acquired by aged care workers in pet care.

By integrating pet care education into aged care training programs, we can ensure that caregivers can support the health and happiness of aged care residents and are adept at caring for the pets that play a significant role in their lives. This holistic approach to aged care training will create more inclusive and pet-friendly environments, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

## **Development of a Pet Transition Assistance Program**

Transitioning into an aged care facility can be challenging for older individuals and their beloved pets. To ease this transition, a Pet Transition Assistance Program is proposed. This program would provide logistical support, health check-ups for pets, and assistance in adapting the living environment to accommodate the needs of both pets and their owners within aged care settings.

The program would begin with a comprehensive assessment of the pet's health and behaviour, ensuring that any medical needs are addressed before the move. This could involve vaccinations, microchipping, and behavioural assessments to identify potential issues in the new environment. Following the health check-up, the program would offer guidance on creating a pet-friendly space within the resident's new home, including safe bedding areas, secure outdoor access if applicable, and modifications to suit the pet's needs, such as ramps for older dogs.

Another critical program component would be providing ongoing support after the move. This could include regular visits from pet care specialists to monitor the pet's adjustment, offering behavioural training to help pets adapt to their new surroundings, and providing continuous health care management.

Partnerships between aged care facilities, veterinary services, animal welfare organisations, and pet care professionals would be essential to facilitate the smooth implementation of the Pet Transition

Assistance Program. These collaborations ensure that a wide range of expertise is available to support pets and their owners during this significant transition.

The program aims to ease the logistical challenges of moving pets into aged care facilities and address the emotional stress associated with such transitions for both the pets and their owners. By providing a structured and supportive process, the Pet Transition Assistance Program ensures that the bond between pets and their owners is maintained and strengthened, even as they adapt to their new living arrangements.

This initiative underscores the importance of considering the needs of both elderly individuals and their pets in aged care policies. It reflects a compassionate and holistic approach to aged care, recognising that pets are not merely animals, but cherished family members whose welfare is intrinsically linked to the well-being of their owners.

### **Pet Involvement in Aged Care Community Activities**

Integrating pets into community activities within aged care facilities can significantly enhance residents' social and emotional environment. This initiative proposes the creation of regular pet-friendly events, community pet gardens, and designated pet interaction zones within aged care settings. These activities promote social interaction, physical activity, and emotional well-being among residents while providing a stimulating and enjoyable environment for pets.

Pet-friendly events could include pet shows, where residents showcase their pets, share stories, and enjoy the companionship of other pet owners. Such events encourage community building and provide a platform for residents to engage in meaningful social interactions. Community pet gardens could be developed as secure outdoor spaces where residents and their pets can enjoy nature together. These gardens would be designed with accessibility in mind, ensuring that all residents, including those with mobility challenges, can participate.

Designating specific areas within aged care facilities as pet interaction zones would allow residents who do not own pets to enjoy the benefits of animal companionship. These zones could host visits from therapy animals and provide opportunities for residents to interact with pets in a controlled and safe environment. Staff and volunteers trained in animal-assisted activities could facilitate these interactions, ensuring a positive experience for residents and pets.

Implementing these pet-involvement initiatives requires collaboration between aged care facility management, residents, family members, and animal welfare organisations. Such collaborations could help in planning and organising events, maintaining pet-friendly spaces, and ensuring the well-being of both pets and residents during activities.

Incorporating pets into community activities within aged care facilities enriches the living environment, providing residents joy, companionship, and engagement opportunities. This approach recognises the vital role of pets and animal interactions in enhancing quality of life and promoting community and belonging among residents.

Expanding on these additional sections will significantly enrich the submission to the Australian Federal Government on the proposed new Aged Care Act. These comprehensive proposals highlight a forward-thinking, inclusive approach to aged care that recognises the intrinsic value of pets in promoting the health, happiness, and well-being of older Australians.

## **Promotion of Pet Adoption within the Aged Care Community**

The Promotion of Pet Adoption within the Aged Care Community initiative seeks to establish a symbiotic relationship between aged care residents capable of providing a loving home and pets needing adoption. This approach addresses the companionship needs of older individuals and contributes to the welfare of animals awaiting shelter homes.

The program would involve partnerships between aged care facilities, animal shelters, and pet rescue organisations like Greyhound Rescue to facilitate matching pets with suitable aged care residents. A thorough assessment would ensure the compatibility between the pet and the potential owner, considering the resident's physical capabilities, the pet's temperament, and the care requirements of both parties.

The program would support successful adoptions by offering ongoing support services, including pet care training for residents, regular pet health checks, and a support network to assist with pet care responsibilities when needed. This comprehensive support system alleviates concerns about pet care challenges, making pet adoption a feasible and rewarding option for aged care residents.

Moreover, the initiative would involve creating awareness campaigns within aged care communities to highlight the benefits of pet adoption. These campaigns could feature success stories of residents who have adopted pets, educational sessions on responsible pet ownership, and information on pets' positive impact on physical and mental health.

The Promotion of Pet Adoption within the Aged Care Community initiative embodies a compassionate approach that enriches the lives of aged care residents and pets. By facilitating these meaningful connections, the program contributes to a culture of care and mutual support within the aged care sector, enhancing the well-being of all involved parties.

## **Research Partnerships to Study Pet Impact in Aged Care Settings**

Establishing research partnerships to study the impact of pets in aged care settings is crucial for validating and expanding our understanding of how animal companionship can benefit elderly populations. This initiative calls for collaborative research efforts between aged care providers, academic institutions, and animal welfare organisations to conduct rigorous studies on pet interaction's physical, emotional, and social effects among aged care residents.

These research partnerships would aim to explore a range of topics, including the impact of pet ownership on the mental health of aged care residents, the physiological effects of regular interaction with pets, and the role of animal-assisted therapy in improving the quality of life for individuals with dementia and other age-related conditions. By employing a variety of research methodologies, including longitudinal studies, case studies, and randomised controlled trials, these partnerships could provide comprehensive insights into the benefits and challenges of integrating pets into aged care environments.

Findings from these research initiatives could inform best practices for pet integration in aged care, guiding policy development and program implementation. Additionally, the research could identify specific conditions or contexts in which pet interaction is most beneficial, enabling targeted interventions that maximise the well-being of aged care residents.

To facilitate these research partnerships, funding agencies and government bodies should consider allocating resources to support studies on pets and aged care. Such funding would advance our



understanding of human-animal interactions and highlight the importance of pets in the holistic care of older individuals.

Through these research partnerships, the aged care sector can leverage scientific evidence to foster environments that recognise pets' significant role in enhancing older Australians' lives. This evidence-based approach will ensure that policies and programs related to pet integration are grounded in a deep understanding of their impact, ultimately leading to improved care outcomes and enriched lives for aged care residents.

## **Conclusion**

Incorporating the needs and benefits of pet ownership and interaction into the New Aged Care Act is crucial for promoting the well-being of older Australians. Pets play a vital role in improving the lives of their owners by offering companionship, emotional support, and numerous health benefits. By recognising and supporting the relationship between older individuals and their pets, the new Aged Care Act can significantly contribute to the quality of care and life for elderly Australians.

Greyhound Rescue aims to improve the lives of older Australians while providing rescued greyhounds with meaningful roles in the community. This submission represents a forward-thinking perspective on aged care, proposing a holistic approach that recognises the intrinsic value of pets in promoting health, happiness, and well-being. In embracing these recommendations, the Australian Government can set a precedent for integrating pet companionship into aged care policies, reflecting a broader understanding of the factors contributing to high-quality care and the overall well-being of its aging population.

We ask the Australian Federal Government to consider these proposals throughout the consultation and development of the new Aged Care Act. Greyhound Rescue is committed to supporting initiatives that enhance the lives of both pets and their owners, and we believe that the inclusion of pet-related provisions in the new Act will significantly benefit older Australians across the country.