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Photography by Karim Shamsi-Basha

It's a dog's life...

at HealthSouth locations
offering Animal Assisted Therapy

Man's best friend is inspiring HealthSouth patients and therapists alike in rehab settings across the country. Progress takes a look at the growing popularity of this not-so-traditional approach to rehabilitation.

Shari Bernard, OTR, at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Tyler, Texas, is one of the foremost authorities on Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). Ten years ago she established her own foundation called Therapet and wrote a book on the subject, *Animal Assisted Therapy: A Guide to Health Care Professionals and Volunteers*.

"I was working on my occupational therapy certification at Baylor University Hospital (Dallas, Texas) and had been showing dogs in competition and taking them to a nursing home," said Bernard. "I got a tremendous response from the patients there and talked my administrator into letting me try it on a limited basis. It took off from there."

In addition to managing the AAT program at HealthSouth, Bernard also works with programs at Trinity Mother Frances Hospital (also in Tyler) and Texas Department of Criminal Justice Skyview Unit, a psychiatric hospital in Rusk, Texas. Furthermore,

she helped establish programs in Great Falls, Mont., Winchester, Va., Harrisonburg, Va., and HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Lafayette, La.

Bernard founded Therapet to help standardize the certification of animals and their handlers. She sees the Therapet guidelines and training as safety measures for both the pet and patient. "If one patient is injured in a session, whether it is with a Therapet certified animal or not, it affects the reputation of all AAT programs," said Bernard.

According to Bernard a variety of animals can be used in AAT from dogs and cats, to rabbits and horses. "We have a horse at Tyler, who of course can't come into the hospital, but he does come into the courtyard and patients can work with him there," said Bernard. "But, don't think these other animals don't have to meet the same strict obedience and health requirements the dogs do. They require the same Therapet certification and clearance from the veterinarian."