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Therapy dogs awarded for service at VA medical center today

Pleasanton's Valley Humane Society, Congressman McNerney pay tribute to canines

Every dog has its day and, yesterday, 18 therapy dogs had theirs at an awards ceremony recognizing their service at the VA Medical Center in Livermore.

The ceremony honored the canines by awarding each with a badge corresponding to the number of hours they have served in the hospital to date. One of the dogs, a 9-year-old black Labrador retriever named Lawrence the Livermore Lab, was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral.

Valley Humane Society volunteer coordinator Pat Wheeler said the title acknowledged all the tail wagging Lawrence has done over the course of his 1,000 hours spent with the patients.

"Lawrence has been there since 2004, when the program started," she said. "He loves it. It's not like work for him."

In addition, Wheeler said that Albert, her 9-year-old Labrador retriever and Border collie mixed breed, received his officer rank for exceeding 750 hours of service. Nine second class petty officer pins were doled out to newly enrolled dogs that, according to Wheeler, are dubbed "petting officers."

Of the remaining seven dogs, she said four were awarded first class rank for reaching 50 hours, two were awarded chief "petting officer" ranks for logging 100 hours and one was awarded the rank of senior chief "petting officer" for a total of 300 hours completed.

Congressman Jerry McNerney (D-Pleasanton), was also at the program to watch the dogs receive their decorations.

"McNerney knows and has seen many of the dogs in other Bay Area events," Wheeler said. "But we were very excited to have him with us at the ceremony."

Sarah Hersh, communications director for Congressman McNerney, said that he is a big advocate of the work the dogs are doing in patients' lives.

"Veterans are a top priority for Congressman McNerney," Hersh said. "And the dogs are worthy to be honored if they are helping the men and women who served our country -- providing them with friendship, comfort and companionship during a difficult time."

McNerney's admiration for the animals has led him to write a foreword for a book about the therapy dogs that the Valley Humane Society expects to release later this year, Wheeler said.

Like McNerney, Wheeler said that the dogs make a huge impact on the lives of those in the hospital beds.

"Even patients that are classified as vegetative respond to the therapy dogs," she said. "Some of them will open their eyes or even talk. It really is touching."

The response, Wheeler said, has to do with animals' ability to provide affection without passing judgment.

"The dogs don't care about their physical condition," she said. "They accept the patients as they are, as living beings."

The patients, Wheeler said, make a lasting impression on the dogs as well.

"One day, a former patient from four years ago was walking in the halls," Wheeler said. "When Lawrence spotted him, he must've run by 10 or 12 other people to jump right in his lap."

The ceremony took place in the main dining room at the VA Medical Center at 4951 Arroyo Road in Livermore.

Anyone interested in getting involved in the therapy program can call the Valley Humane Society at (925) 426-8656 or visit

www.valleyhumane.org.

Kristen Peters, Bay City News

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