



YOU AND YOURS - ASSISTANCE DOGS

TX: 29.01.03

BARCLAY

Can a dog replace a carer? If two pairs of hands are better than one how about four paws? A special charity has trained more than 60 animals to be, what are called, "assistance dogs". Once trained the canine carers are able to help someone transfer in and out of a wheelchair, get dressed in the morning, generally regain some independence and the results are incredible. Having a dog helper has allowed some disabled people to return to work. In other cases their husbands or wives have been freed up from their carer role so that they can go back to work.

At the moment the charity Canine Partners for Independence trains and provides the dogs - the disabled person pays for the food and the vet bills. The charity wants the dogs though to be included in official local authority care packages because as our disability issues reporter, Carolyn Atkinson, has been hearing from people who use them, the savings in care costs are enormous.

ACTUALITY

Off we go to work - yes. Are you going to get the door then? Open the door. Good boy.

PLUES

I'm Wendy Plues, I work here - work in Information for Disability enquiries, I'm the senior information officer. This is my canine partner dog Indie and he's a yellow Labrador, he's four years old and he's an absolute treasure - he's changed my life completely.

ACTUALITY

You don't have to - oh kisses too.

ATKINSON

Wendy is a wheelchair user, she has eight medical conditions including the painful muscle disease fibromyalgia.

ACTUALITY

That's it, good boy.

ATKINSON

Before Indie arrived Wendy needed a 24 hour day care package which costs around a thousand pounds a week. She now needs just 35 hours care, saving her local authority

£650 every week. That means the £9,000 cost of training a dog could be recouped in just 13 weeks. The savings are clear and Wendy says Indie is 100 per cent reliable.

PLUES

He does absolutely loads of things for me - he gets me undressed at night, he unloads the washing machine, he gets me the telephone. I need carers for housework and for getting me washing - because unfortunately Indie can't wash any hair - he can't get up on his hind legs and he's not very good at making tea either. But apart from that he does everything else for me, which is incredible. Indie will wake me up in the night to tell me to turn over because I get into cramps and spasms. So it's changed my life drastically.

ACTUALITY

... can I help you? Yes.

ATKINSON

Councils pay anything between the minimum wage to more than £20 an hour for weekend overnight care. And if agencies provide the carers there's also a fee. Wendy says since Indie arrived not only has she reduced her care package but she's also been able to return to paid work. Only one office support worker is now required to help with handwriting because Indie deals with Wendy's toileting and admin needs.

ACTUALITY

Hi this is Wendy, how can I help?

PLUES

He also helps me here in the office - he'll pass messages from one person to the next, I'm always dropping things on the floor and he'll pick them straight up for me and he's watching me, he can tell me if I'm going to be bad, he can tell me if I need my tablets. I can't be here without him.

ATKINSON

Pauline Hamblin from Canine Partners for Independence says more than 60 disabled people now have one of their assistance dogs, another 30 animals are part way through the 18 month training programme ready to operate at home and at work.

HAMBLIN

This is only a small office and there are one, two, three, four wheelchairs and yet the dog saw a need, a pen got dropped, came out, picked it up, gave it, went back into bed and the dog's not in the way. The dog's very comfortable with that which is great.

ATKINSON

Pauline Hamblin says Wendy's experience is typical of how an assistance dog can dramatically change a client's life. She says there are many proven psychological and physical benefits for the whole family.

HAMBLIN

The dog can reduce medication, pain relief can go down, antidepressants can come off because our natural endorphins start working when you're interested and happy. The dog can help antidepressants go off carers, because carers too are on antidepressants,

not all of them but some of them because it's hard and if you get someone back to work their doctor's visits are reduced, their need for people to come and call at home reduces. So there are savings.

ACTUALITY

Hello, hello - Jakey - slippers, slippers. Good boy. Good boy. Jake.

ATKINSON

Black Labrador Jake has had a huge impact on 38-year-old former international marketing manager - Spiro Sueref - who has multiple sclerosis.

ACTUALITY

Good boy.

ATKINSON

No one is suggesting that Canine Carers are the answer for everyone but not only do assistance dogs change the lives of the disabled person, they also have a dramatic effect on their families.

SPIRO SUEREF

I'm currently in receipt of care. Two ladies, in fact, come in every other day for when I have a shower to make sure I don't fall over and hurt myself. At the moment I'm receiving approximately 10 hours a week, the chances are if Jake wasn't with me I'd be needing more like 15 or 20 hours a week.

ATKINSON

Now Jackie you're Spiro's wife you now work full-time as a teacher, how has it changed your way of life really by having Jake here?

JACKIE SUEREF

If we hadn't had the dog I was considering ideas such as maybe having to go part-time then that would mean my child Emma having to change schools because of the funding situation. So Jake has enabled us to continue, as much as possible, in our normal way of life basically and so we can carry on doing what we want to do.

ACTUALITY

Okay, food, that's it good boy, going on then. Oh drinky - look, looks there's post.

EMMA SUEREF

I'm Emma Sueref and I'm eight years old. I just like feel more safe because I think that daddy's going to be safer at home with Jake than on his own.

ACTUALITY

Come with me Jakey.

SPIRO SUEREF

I believe that in terms of savings there are applicable to social services we're probably looking at halving their current costs, I would have thought, from my experience.

ATKINSON

Canine Partners for Independence is now lobbying ministers and MPs for assistance dogs to be included, where appropriate, within local authority care packages.

Back at the Woking Information for Disability Office Wendy Plues says for the first time since she became disabled she can now live life spontaneously.

PLUES

I used to have to wait for social services to come out to get me undressed at night. I had to be in between 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock because that's the only slot they could give me. I had a curfew. Quite often I was in - undressed, in my night clothes, before my son was.

ATKINSON

Wendy says ministers and social services chiefs are missing a trick.

PLUES

I would say come and see Indie and come and see how he works and how much money it actually saves the government because I would actually be either in a care home or need 24 hour carers and yet I've got a nice little furry friend who keeps me independent and that's what life is all about.

BARCLAY

Wendy Plues ending that report.

Edward Davey is MP for Kingston and Surbiton and is lobbying for assistance dogs to be included in local authority care packages. He explained why.

DAVEY

Well some of those people who need this care can't afford the food bills, they can't afford the vet bills so someone has to step in to make sure that they get this independence that the assistance dogs can provide. And in many ways the mechanism is there at the moment. There's a system called direct payments by which the person needing the care gets the money from the social services department and uses the direct payment to purchase their own care but many social service departments don't realise that those direct payments can be used for that purpose. So they need to be instructed by the government through clearer guidelines that the direct payments can be used for that purpose, that will help many more people benefit from assistance dogs.

BARCLAY

As with all these rules about benefit payments it's sometimes unclear what they can and cannot be used for. Are you clear and is the government clear that these direct payments could be used for this purpose?

DAVEY

Well I wrote to the government last year to clarify this point because I wasn't clear and Canine Partners for Independence weren't clear because many social service departments up and down the country weren't clear. But I've got it now in black and white from Jackie Smith, the minister at the Department of Health, that direct payments can be used for the purchase and care of an assistance dog. She says that

the exact arrangements have to be decided at the local level, but it's very clear in black and white from the minister that direct payments can be used to purchase assistance dogs.

BARCLAY

What about people who aren't on direct payments, is there any provision there?

DAVEY

Well there isn't at the moment, that's one reason why I think we need to go rather further than just giving guidelines. We need to make sure in the care plans that are agreed between local social service departments and individuals that the role of the dog can actually be put into the care plan. The minister in her reply to me said that wasn't possible because carers could only be human beings, well there may be some legal responsibility issues there but I can't see why you couldn't actually write in the benefits of a dog to the individual and the dog can be seen as providing caring services.

BARCLAY

At the heart of this seems to be a lack of awareness of the fact that these dogs exist and can do as much to help as they do.

DAVEY

That's right. The experience of Canine Partners for Independence is that many social service departments haven't even come across this fabulous solution which not only gives greater independence for the person needing the care - it means they don't have to use so many carers - but also saves the social service department money. So I think we need to make sure that social services departments become aware and that's a role for central government to spread best practice.

BARCLAY

So what do you want government to do? You want guidelines?

DAVEY

We want the minister to write to social service departments, make them aware of this option, produce very clear guidelines that direct payments can be used and also to look at this issue of putting the dogs into the care plans and care packages that social service departments agree with the individuals and their communities.

BARCLAY

Edward Davy MP. We did ask the minister, Jackie Smith, to come on the programme but she was unavailable.