

# Paws to Reflect

## A Novel Approach for Frontline Caregiver Support

Susan Parisi, MD, FACOG, Brittany Drumm, MBA, BCC, Dawn Snyder, RN MSN, Stephanie Andreacci, LCSW, Casey Marfitt, MA

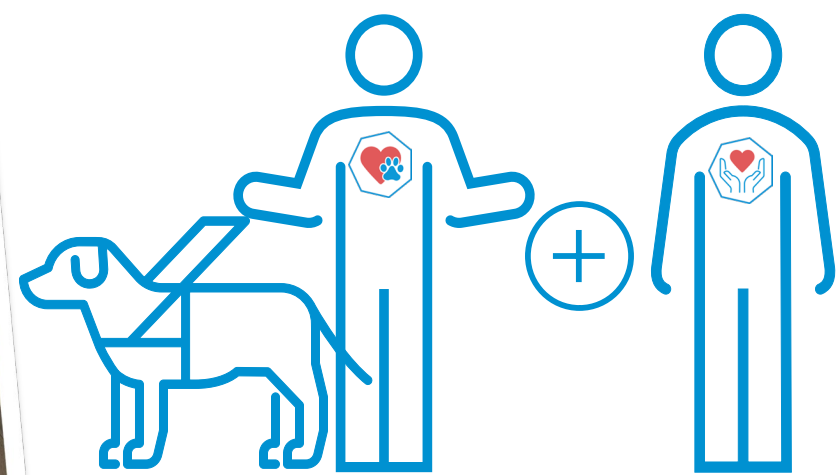
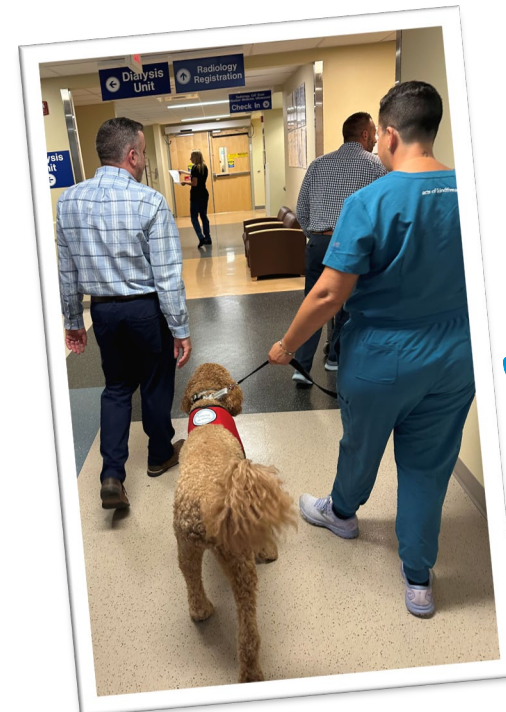
### Learning Objectives

1. Define peer support and animal assisted therapy as mental health support modalities within healthcare settings.
2. Explore a model of unified peer support and pet therapy as a novel approach to engaging frontline healthcare workers.
3. Review the initial successes of the model and communication mechanisms used to drive that success.

### Background

In the uncertainty of the healthcare landscape since 2020, frontline caregivers of all backgrounds have been struggling to find balance, solace, and respite. The Paws to Reflect program was developed as a novel, evidence-informed approach to peer support that uses animal assisted therapy to lower the barrier to entry on difficult, often stigmatized conversations.

The program's creation utilized a PDSA framework with emphasis on active and frequent listening, deep, intentional empathy, and rapid iteration to meet our employees' needs. The program utilizes and enhances existing volunteer-based structures, making it extremely high-yield for low financial investment.



### Definitions

**Peer Supporter:** someone with the shared lived experience of working in a healthcare setting, trained to provide non-clinical emotional support to those around them. Peer supporters engage peers often in day-to-day social conversation, and actively build a foundation of trust. This allows them to be a strong first responder in times of hardship and allows them to direct peers more easily to ongoing resources as needed. MPATH (Meeting Peers at the Heart) is Geisinger's peer support program.

**Animal Assisted Therapy:** a supportive modality using the calming presence of animals to help people as they recover from challenging emotional and physical situations.

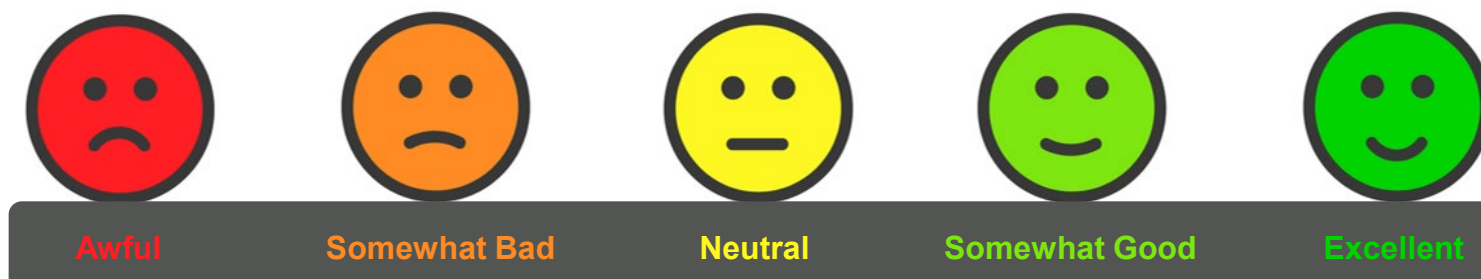


### Methods

<b>Listen</b>	Surveyed over <b>1,500 hospital-based employees, primarily nurses</b> , on frontline mental health challenges, barriers to support seeking, and ways they'd like to be supported. <b>Pet therapy</b> emerged as a leading area of opportunity.
<b>Empathize</b>	Created a persona utilizing these inputs to <b>explore new ways for supporting the complex emotional load, grief, moral distress, and exhaustion</b> felt daily by individuals and teams.
<b>Hypothesize</b>	Literature reviews demonstrated both <b>animal assisted therapy</b> and <b>peer support</b> as singular successful modalities to provide <b>support for the healthcare workforce</b> . We hypothesized that <b>together they may amplify efficacy and support for help seeking</b> .
<b>Establish</b>	Formed a <b>unique program housed within the Center for Professionalism and Well-being</b> for therapy to extend the impact of peer support.
<b>Design</b>	Created a workflow to allow <b>trained peer supporters to round with therapy dog handlers</b> , providing a deeper level of support beyond the momentary joy pet therapy can offer.
<b>Adapt</b>	<b>Adapted existing policies</b> volunteers to onboard and contribute time, <b>creating a unique onboarding and volunteerism experience for the new pet handlers</b> . Considerations for procedures, bandwidth, and recruitment were made to ensure the demands of the separate patient-facing pet therapy program were able to be met.
<b>Brand</b>	Partnered with marketing division to <b>create a multi-channel internal and external marketing campaign</b> , including unique brand identities and supportive materials for MPATH and Paws to Reflect.
<b>Recruit</b>	Utilized multiple media outlets to <b>recruit new, interested pet owners</b> . <b>Monetary incentivization was provided for completion of dog therapy certification with commitment to the Paws to Reflect program</b> .
<b>Prepare</b>	<b>Reimagined the MPATH Peer Support curriculum</b> and recruited over 200 new peer supporters eligible to volunteer to round with Paws dogs and handlers.
<b>Launch</b>	<b>Rounding initiated in May of 2023</b> with 1 dog and 17 peer supporters. The program has grown to include <b>19 dogs and 257 peer supporters as of March 1, 2024</b> .

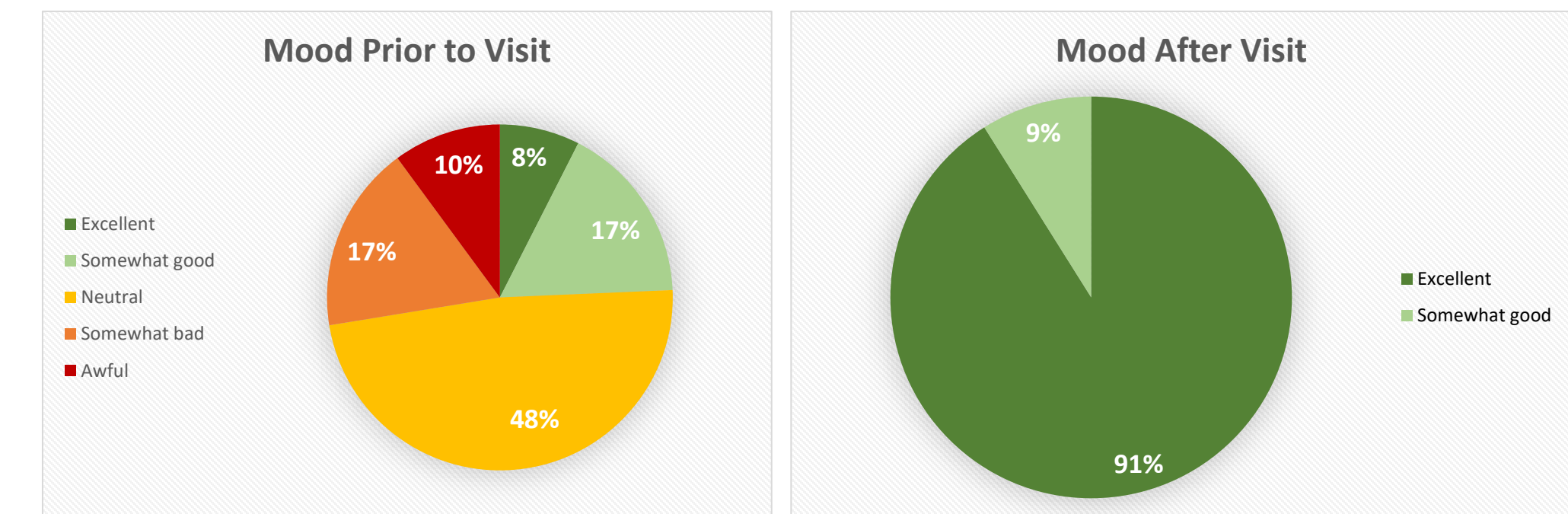
### Data Collection

Over **1,200 employees** that have received Paws to Reflect visits were asked a two-question, visual Likert scale survey to assess 1) **Mood Prior to Visit** and 2) **Mood After Visit**.



### Results

**100%** of participants report **positive mood improvement** after visit, with **91%** of those participants rating their mood as **“excellent”**.



### Conclusion

Demand for the Paws to Reflect program is outpacing supply. Although the program required low fiscal investment, challenges exist in balancing fiscal sustainability with opportunities and team requests for expansion. Additional challenges include accessibility for outlying healthcare offices in a geographically expansive organization and the increasing work from home employee population. Assessment of duration of mood improvement and potential protective benefits could enhance the longer-term impact of this program.

While the systemic drivers of burnout cannot be addressed by pet therapy or peer support alone, the value of the Paws to Reflect Program is the shift to a culture where we meet healthcare workers where they are; we bring supportive conversations, intentional respite, awareness of resources and moments of meaning infused into their workday. By taking the direct feedback of staff and creating a novel structure to deliver on their requests, we continue to facilitate spaces of dialogue that say "We're here, we're listening. We're ready to support you. What can we do next?"