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Introducing the Four Winds Resident Therapy Dog

When you come to Four Winds Hospital you might be surprised to find that one of our most loyal and dedicated staff members has four legs and ears past his chin. That's Oliver—Four Wind's resident Therapy Dog! Sarah Klagsbrun, MD, Medical Director is Oliver's owner and handler. You'll find them together throughout the day on different units and meeting with different patients. The commonality is that they spread joy wherever they go.

Therapy dogs are trained to provide psychological or physiological therapy to individuals other than their handlers. These dogs need to have stable temperaments and friendly, easy-going personalities. Unlike service dogs, which are trained to perform tasks and do work that eases the disability or their single handler, therapy dogs are encouraged to interact with a variety of people while on duty; not only is petting them allowed, it is encouraged. Therapy dogs must meet set standards to be certified and registered. They are usually handled by their owners.

When Dr. Klagsbrun first met Oliver, she thought he would make a good therapy dog. Oliver is an enthusiastic and loving dog who wants to please others. He is part Cocker Spaniel and part King Charles Cavalier. Brought to the ASPCA by the NYPD, Oliver was dangerously skinny with matted hair that had to be shaved off. He has a beautiful coat now thanks to his adoption by Dr. Klagsbrun.

Oliver first attended training sessions to learn basic obedience skills. Then he attended the Good Dog, Foundation, Inc. certification and training program with Dr. Klagsbrun. Recognized as among the most innovative and reliable therapy dog organizations, the Good Dog Foundation uses professionals to train handlers and their dogs to provide services that aid another person's healing process and promote recovery from trauma and stress. It also contributes to research and data collection in the field of animal-assisted therapy.



As soon as Oliver was certified, he was ready to start serving the Four Winds patient community. Patients who have been afraid of dogs have been able to relax with Oliver and make progress addressing their fears. Some feel soothed by petting and holding Oliver during therapy sessions allowing them to discuss uncomfortable topics.

Research has shown that there are many health benefits, both mental and physical, to having a dog. Therapy dogs have been shown to help patients diagnosed with a range of issues, such as depression, bipolar disorder, autism and post-traumatic stress disorder. The act of petting a dog releases an automatic relaxation response. Studies have shown that such interactions promote the release of serotonin and can increase the release of mood-boosting hormones oxytocin and dopamine and decrease the stress hormone cortisol. Dogs provide comfort, reduce loneliness and increase mental stimulation.

This might not be new information to dog-owners everywhere, but it is why therapy dogs are used at Four Winds. We strive to create an environment where people can smile and feel calm and happy while they heal. Several volunteer handlers have brought their certified therapy dogs to Four Winds for many years for group sessions with the patients. Their visits are always a resounding success and we are grateful for the work they do. Now that Oliver has joined the hospital staff, he is able to bring comfort and love to patients and staff every day. We're thrilled to have him!