

HERMITAGE HALL

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News Release

For Immediate Release

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TINY PET HELPS WITH TREATMENT AT HERMITAGE HALL

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – A tiny, furry animal from Indonesia called the sugar glider is now being used by caregivers at Hermitage Hall as part of a new animal assisted therapy to help residents learn better coping skills and to feel less lonely and depressed.

Hermitage Hall experts say the sugar glider also is a communication catalyst among residents and staff and helps to reinforce rehabilitative behaviors, teach responsibility and improve empathy for others.

“Animal assisted therapy is a goal-directed intervention designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional or cognitive functioning,” said Charles Gorecki, CTRS, the lead recreational therapist for Hermitage Hall. “We’re seeing positive results. Interacting with the sugar glider breaks down walls and gets kids to start talking about the animals they had a home, or to open up about their feelings. Many of our boys have never had a pet before, so learning to care for an animal gives them a newfound sense of pride.”

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According to Gorecki, several of the boys gave the sugar glider the name, Gizmo. Now Gizmo has become a permanent and much-loved fixture at the facility. Residents look forward to seeing Gizmo whenever the occasion permits.

Access to Gizmo for therapeutic purposes is offered in a variety of settings, including groups and on an individual basis. In all cases, the process is led by health and human service professionals and is documented and evaluated for therapeutic purposes, Gorecki said.

The sugar glider, which is found not only in Indonesia, but also Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea, is a popular pet because it bonds well with humans and has a lively and inquisitive nature. The animal weighs 4-6 ounces as an adult, has very thick soft grey mink-like fur with a black stripe that runs the full length of the body and becomes extremely friendly when provided daily interaction with residents.

The sugar glider is kept in a cage in the vocational room at Hermitage Hall and cared for by the recreation staff and resident volunteers, Gorecki said. The therapy is available for residents who wish to participate, have no fear of animals and have no health conflicts.

Hermitage Hall, which operates a 112-bed residential sex offender program for adolescent males ages 9-18, is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) and licensed by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. Hermitage Hall is a member of the KidLink Placement Network, a national referral source for education and treatment programs helping troubled kids or at-risk youth.

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