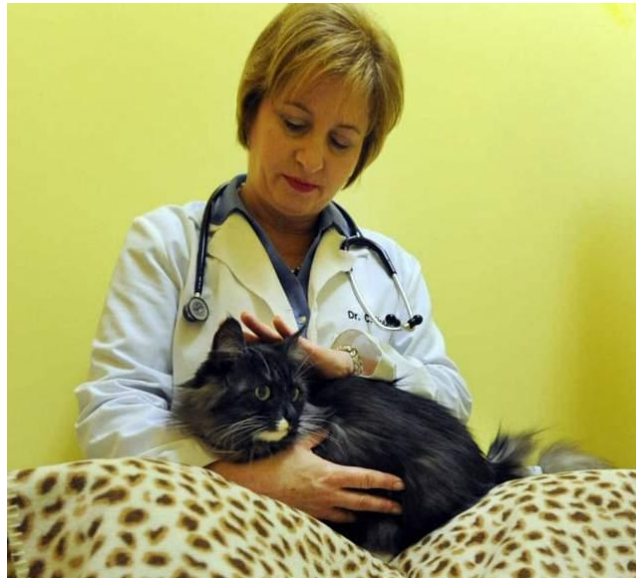


Metro and State

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Cats get end-of-life care at pet hospice

- By Lauren Abdel-Razzaq The Detroit News



Dr. Cindy Houlihan on Thursday examines Flash, a 12-year-old cat with intestinal cancer who has undergone three weeks of hospice care treatments, at The Cat Practice in Birmingham. (Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

Birmingham — When her cat Rocky was diagnosed with heart disease and diabetes, Maryann Clark wasn't sure what to do for her beloved pet.

Years earlier, she'd had another cat with a terminal illness. Rocky's diagnosis brought back memories of weekly trips to the veterinarian's office for fluid treatments that had left her cat Cusum swollen and uncomfortable. She knew she didn't want to do the same to Rocky.

"I wasn't able to do anything at home for her," the Troy resident said. "Nobody was giving me any options."

That's when she turned to The Cat Practice, a small clinic at 875 S. Worth Road off Woodward Avenue in Birmingham. There she met Laura Kramek, a veterinary technician specializing in geriatric and hospice care for cats, who helped develop an end-of-life treatment plan for Rocky.

The clinic, which for years has offered care for elderly or terminally ill felines, this week announced a home-based hospice program the owners say is the first of its kind in Michigan.

"Our clients that were coming in with their kitties asked for it," Kramek said. "We're just formalizing it now."

Hospice may not be the proper choice in all situations and sometimes euthanasia is a better option for extremely ill pets, said veterinarian Cindy Houlihan, who joined the clinic in 1987 and is now the principal owner. But advancement in medications and treatments can give owners more choices while still doing what's best for the animal.

"It's just about keeping the kitties happy and comfortable for the remainder of their lives," Houlihan said.

Enrolling in the hospice program at The Cat Practice costs \$75 dollars per week, which includes the cost of office visits and gives patients access to veterinarians at all times. Medications can cost a great deal more, although the clinic has partnered with a pharmaceutical firm to provide discounts to clients.

The clinic also is turning to Dr. Camille Greenwald, a Birmingham-based psychologist, to help owners come to terms with loss. Greenwald herself knows something of the grieving process: Two of her cats were in Kramek's hospice program years ago.

Greenwald will be teaching a grieving seminar, and clients can make appointments with her. There is an additional cost, although it could be covered by health insurance.

"Sometimes people make an assumption that grieving and mourning the loss of a pet is going to be easier than losing a human being and they are often taken by surprise," Greenwald said.

Determining whether hospice care is a viable option for a pet involves weighing the severity of the disease, observing the animal's behavior and determining a prognosis for quality of life, said Kramek.

"It's stopping trying to help them live longer just for the sake of living longer," she said. "The goal is to keep the kitties at home with their loved ones. It's all about making them as comfortable as possible for as long as they have left."

Some of the suggestions are easy enough, such as moving food bowls and beds into accessible locations and giving the cats lots of their favorite treats and toys. Other options involve using different oral and topical medications to manage pain.

The Cat Practice's 15 employees sees 12 to 15 cats a day and is open seven days a week.

In the back, nestled in heated beds, two of the clinic's four resident cats, Caitlin and Frank, relax while listening to soothing music from a desktop computer. Before Caitlin's elderly owner died, Houlihan had promised to look after her cats.

At the front desk, another resident, Taco, greets clients as they come in. Roaming in the back treatment room, behind a closed door, visiting cats chase each other and play with toys, while staffers work around them.

"Everyone cares deeply about what they do," Houlihan says of her staff. "Even when the cats are scared or not feeling well, that we can make it better for them gives us great joy."

A few years after Maryann Clark's cat Rocky began treatment, his mother, Purrdy, was diagnosed with kidney failure. Once again, Clark went to Kramek for help. Rocky ended up living for four more years after his diagnosis, but Purrdy died within a year.

While the process of medicating and taking care of her cats was often time-consuming and expensive, Clark says it was worth it.

"If this was my child I wouldn't say 'well too bad, you're diabetic, I can't do anything for you,'" she said. "With the medications, you see such a difference in the quality of their life."

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