As you might expect, the Center for Addiction Treatment in Cincinnati’s West End neighborhood is full of people seeking treatment for their substance use issues. Except for the first Sunday every month. That’s when a visitor with velvety black fur and kind brown eyes ambles up to patients in the short-term residential drug and alcohol treatment program. And he lets them touch him.

Some in the room relax. Some smile. Some reach out for the dog. Pets as therapy are nothing new. Maybe they were always therapy. They tend to bring out the better in almost all of us. We become more human in their presence somehow.

If having pets in the room works wonders for troubled children, the disabled, emergency workers and the elderly, why wouldn’t it work for those in recovery? Larry Bennett asked that question. Bennett and his 4-year-old dog, Kelly Phipps, a graduate of the Center for Addiction Treatment who is soon to be a peer mentor there, pets on Frye the black lab. “It’s unconditional love you can’t get anywhere,” Phipps says. Larry Bennett, right, makes a monthly Sunday visit with his therapy dog to the West End drug recovery program.

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Frye, began volunteering their time at the CAT House in December 2017. They also visit hospitals, schools and autistic children at Stepping Stones, a nonprofit for people with disabilities. Last week, the pair traveled to Red Cross shelters in Dayton after tornadoes destroyed homes and businesses in the area.

It’s important to note that therapy animals are not service animals. Service animals are trained to assist those with disabilities. Therapy animals provide solace, sweetness, calm to anyone.

Bennett knows his lab isn’t made of magic. The duo is pretty ordinary, but delivering even a small amount of joy makes the difference. Bennett really believes that.

His idea of taking Frye to those in recovery was a direct result of hearing about a program started by Barbara Walkenhorst, recovery coach and case manager at CAT, where graduates of rehab programs were returning to fire stations and hugging the firefighters who revived them with naloxone, the antidote for opioid overdose, and care.

“If the firefighters and patients are getting hugs, maybe someone would like to hug my dog. Do you think your patients would benefit from meeting a lovely dog?” he asked Walkenhorst.

“Absolutely,” Bennett remembered her saying.

A simple solution to an incredibly complex problem? Could be.

Nearly 30 patients sat in a meeting room at CAT last week. They listened as Bennett joked that this was his third leash and PetSmart was selling them to him at a discount now because it’s Frye’s favorite thing to chew on.

The room laughed.

Frye stretched his legs, rolled onto his back and shook his whole body – this was his way of asking for a belly rub, Bennett said. A patient knelt onto the floor to oblige.

“I fell in love,” she said later, stroking his satiny, floppy ears. “I’m generally closed off, and he changed my mind.”

Another patient gently took the dog’s face in her hands. She sighed.

Frye kissed her.

Bennett is not just a dog fan. He’s an associate professor and the program chair for fire science and emergency management at the University of Cincinnati. He called the gathering an “informal, laid-back experience” when he spends a half-hour to an hour recounting Frye’s story from rescue pup to certified therapy dog, then hands out Frye stickers for patients to wear or paste on their notebooks.

The facility’s inpatient program is full and most of the patients are there to treat opioid addictions.

Sitting quietly in the room was Kelly Phipps, who graduated the program in November.

Phipps has struggled with substance use for years. Primarily alcohol, but drugs, too, she said.

She just marked eight months drug-free. In mid-June, she will start as a peer mentor at the center.

Throughout it all, she’s been an animal lover.

“With my pets being at home, that was a big thing for me,” Phipps said. “I didn’t want to leave them. They are such a comfort. It’s unconditional love you can get anywhere.”

She said seeing Frye was like, “OK, this is my inspiration to keep going and get home to see my pets so I can love on them the same way.”

Pet therapy, then, is more motivation to return to what used to be. It is also comfort while trying to get free of drugs.

Nancy Blamer, development manager at CAT, said many new patients feel “a lot of anxiety and fear of the unknown” when they start treatment because they don’t know what to expect. But human-animal interaction deflects at least a little bit of that anxiety.

“When you’re with Frye, that hour that you’re with him, you’re not thinking about anything else except being right there and present with the dog,” a CAT manager says.

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