

# The Suffolk Times.

## New Therapy Dog To Bring The Healing To SBELIH

Amanda Olsen | August 19, 2024



*Hannah, the golden retriever and certified therapy dog, and her owner Alex Bratty get to work on the floor of ESBLIH.*

There's a new pooch roaming the common areas of Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital's (SBELIH) Quannacut Inpatient Behavioral Health Services. Hannah, a golden retriever and certified therapy dog through Michael's Angel Paws, and her handler, Alex Bratty, have been helping people adjust and cope with their circumstances while in care.

According to the National Institutes of Health, interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone) and lower blood pressure. Other studies have found that animals can reduce loneliness, increase feelings of social support, and boost your mood.

"It changes the energy. Smiles start to appear. Some people don't even want to wait for me to bring her around, so they'll come to her. They want to get to her faster. Some of them will sit on the floor with her, because they want to get down and really love with her," said Ms. Bratty. "So

the patients will pet her. They'll get in behind her ears, and she'll pause with them. Some of them love to feed her treats. We just roll with however people want to interact with her. But I do think the biggest thing is that our mission is to spread smiles and joy and love, and I think that that happens in pretty much all the interactions that we have."

The visits are short, usually around 30 minutes, but they have a long-term effect on the patients who interact with Hannah. "It's a small piece of their day, but for some of them, and we've heard this from both the patients and the staff, it turns their whole day around. So even though that we're there for that short period, it has a lasting effect too," said Ms. Bratty.



Faith Grieshaber, the creative arts therapist at SBELIH, said that the therapy dog visits have a big impact on the patients' well-being. Many people connect over their shared love of dogs, creating a familiarity that helps them heal.

"Even though Hannah does not talk, she is such a conversation starter...The joy they have connecting with people and talking with people over a shared interest, could have a ripple effect for them, not just that day, but outside of here, when they are done with their treatment. They can see that they can continue finding these joys and the little things of seeing a dog and just like overall, just increasing their quality of life."

Ms. Bratty echoed this idea of Hannah's work echoing outward into the community, paying it forward in new ways. "We may be in a room, and there's 15 people in the room, and she interacts with all of them, and so we have that impact with 15 people in that room. Some of them then go and talk about Hannah, or she'll have an impact in some way that'll make them think differently or do something different in their life, or feel differently, and then that impacts the people that they are with. It's a bigger impact than just the people that you see in that moment."

The therapy dog is part of a suite of psychosocial programs the hospital implements. "This really is a critical benefit for the hospital, especially because Alex does it on a volunteer basis. To have this type of emotional support for the patients we serve is fantastic," said Linda Sweeney, vice president of foundation and external affairs. "Psychosocial programs like horticultural therapy, music therapy, creative arts therapy are so critical to patients' recovery."

Ms. Bratty sees her work with Hannah to be a calling. They are a team, with Hannah providing the comfort and love people may be missing from their own pets, and Ms. Bratty tempering Hannah's enthusiasm and engaging with the patients as needed.

“I consider it to be an honor and a privilege that we’re able to do this work. I see how much love these dogs have, how much love they just generate in our home, and I want other people to benefit from that. I mean, yeah, she’s a certified therapy dog. She went through all the testing and all the rest of it, but I actually believe that all dogs are therapy dogs. You know, if you have a dog in your home, they’re therapy for you.”

The Bratty family lives on Shelter Island, and the family’s other golden retriever, Grace, will be complete her Michael’s Angel Paws therapy dog certification in the fall.