



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Brittany Jennings

Phone: (205) 322-5144

Email: [brittany@handinpaw.org](mailto:brittany@handinpaw.org)

*Animal-Assisted Therapy: Four-legged Friends Aiding in Spinal Cord Injury Recovery*

**BIRMINGHAM, AL:** All dog lovers agree that simply petting a furry, four-legged friend instantly heightens happiness and reduces stress. To officially prove how animals can increase physiological and psychological well-being, researchers from the University of Alabama at Birmingham partnered with Hand in Paw, Alabama's premier Animal-Assisted Therapy provider. Specifically, researchers studied the role Animal-Assisted Therapy played in the recovery process of patients with spinal cord injuries.

According to the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, approximately 17,000 new cases of spinal cord injury are reported in the United States each year. Recovery from a spinal cord injury can be lengthy and often takes a serious toll mentally and physically on patients. Some patients are not only coping with physical pain, but also the reality of a lifelong disability. These patients are at high risk for physiological distress, such as depression and anxiety.

Essentially patients with spinal cord injuries need to feel a connection outside of physicians, medical staff, and even family or friends. Animals are nonjudgmental, unbiased aides for patients in recovery. They may be the key to helping some patients rebuild mental and physical strength.

Patients and therapy dogs who participated in the study completed sessions aimed to improve mobility and range of motion as well as restore fine motor skills. By reaching for, petting or walking with the dogs, patients were able to boost core strength, mobility, and range of motion. Fine motor skills were strengthened by pulling treats from bags, feeding dogs, pouring water for dogs from bottles, placing clips in the dogs' hair and draping necklaces over the dogs' necks.

Of the spinal cord injury patients who participated in the study, most experienced a modest reduction in pain, a significant decrease in stress, and general improvements in mood and enthusiasm. According to a leading research partner, Dr. David Schwebel, Professor of Psychology at UAB, "Dogs soothe us when we are down and comfort us when we are in pain, and our results suggest they even help us after a life-changing injury. More research is needed; but we encourage Hand in Paw and similar agencies to continue their valuable work, as it seems to offer health benefits to patients."

Hand in Paw highly values our community partners, like UAB. Our organization depends on them to further our mission and deepen our impact on the communities we serve.

###

**ABOUT HAND IN PAW**

With a mission to improve human health & well-being, Hand in Paw is Alabama's premier Animal-Assisted Therapy provider and a national leader in this growing field. Hand in Paw's professionally-trained volunteer handler and animal Therapy Teams help improve people's day to day lives in several medical centers, schools, and human service organizations throughout North Central Alabama and Tuscaloosa. Our volunteer teams make thousands of beneficial visits through community events and participating facilities each year, helping countless children with special needs, at-risk youth, struggling students, and people with chronic and terminal illnesses. At no time has Hand in Paw charged for its services. For more information, visit [www.handinpaw.org](http://www.handinpaw.org).