**A Message from the Director Regarding Emotional Support Animals**

In recent years the idea of Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) or Assistance Animals has become very popular. Health services all over the country have received numerous requests from students to write letters stating that they have a mental health or medical condition that would benefit from the presence of an animal. Most often these requests are made by students who report some kind of emotional distress or difficulty adjusting to the environment and would like to be able to have an animal to comfort them in a residence hall or an apartment that typically would not accept pets. It is understandable to want an adorable, fluffy, warm and cuddly creature who is always thrilled to have us around. There is even some research evidence that petting dogs can decrease nervous system arousal, increase serotonin, epinephrine and oxytocin (all feel-good neurochemicals).

But we at the ETSU Counseling Center do not prescribe ESAs and we will not issue letters stating that a student needs one. In addition, we do not permit ESAs in the ETSU Counseling Center in order to protect those with animal allergies or other students who do not respond well to the presence of animals, and to prevent disruptions and distractions in our health care setting and during appointments and treatment procedures. Here are other reasons why we maintain this stance on ESAs:

1. ESAs are not Service Animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) because they are not trained to perform a specific duty to compensate for a disability. If a student *does* meet the criteria for a disability (which could only be determined after a thorough assessment) then a variety of accommodations may be considered, typically in collaboration with Disability Services on campus. It is important to note that misrepresenting an ESA as a Service Animal is a violation of the law.
2. The benefit of ESAs is their mere presence. Most of us who have pets can also attest to the same warm and wonderful feelings created when we are interacting with our pets, too. Except for a smaller subset of human beings, most people experience positive benefits from interactions with cuddly animals. This positive effect does not mean that a diagnosable condition has been identified or treated or that providers will now prescribe it. There are many things that may produce similar positive effects in human beings (exercise, music, etc.). We may even recommend those things to you as a part of a healthy lifestyle, but we do not prescribe them, and will not write letters advocating that you have them everywhere.

Please let us know at the ETSU Counseling Center if you are experiencing distressing emotional and physical symptoms or if you are having difficulty adjusting to this environment. We are available to assess and treat you using the knowledge, skills, and tools we were trained to use. We truly understand the love and connection we can have with animals, how they benefit us, and many students desires to have one. We simply do not prescribe them.

The above statement is adopted from the University of New Mexico Student Health and Counseling (SHAC).