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**Contact Information:**

Sean Rice

507-535-5750 (days)

507-279-0967 (evenings)

[seanr@zumbromhc.org](mailto:seanr@zumbromhc.org)

[www.zumbromhc.org](http://www.zumbromhc.org)

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Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center Adds New Pet Therapy Option

*Lexi to Join Therapy Staff*

**Rochester, Minn.** – Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center is adding animal-assisted therapy to its outpatient therapy treatment services. Beginning this week, clients will have the option of having Lexi join appointments with therapist Kathryn Amundson, Ph.D.

Lexi, a six-year-old Samoyed, is certified by Therapy Dogs International. A former champion show dog, she also has passed the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen test.

“Animal-assisted therapy utilizes the human-animal bond as an integral part of the treatment process,” said Amundson, a licensed independent clinical social worker for Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center. “This therapy provides multiple benefits, including decision making and instruction following, memory recall and extended and concentrated attention span.”

Interaction with animals is known to have a positive therapeutic effect on people and can relieve stress, lower blood pressure, improve social skills, raise spirits and bring out self confidence in individuals. For years, therapy dogs have been used in schools, hospitals and retirement communities to provide comfort and affection as well as entertainment and simple enjoyment. While therapeutic benefits were found as early as 1912 in psychiatric populations, it was only in the late 1980s that it had been validated in mental health settings and chemical dependency clinics.

Through animal-assisted training, Amundson said she work will with clients to set therapeutic goals, guide the interaction between Lexi and the client, measure progress toward meeting therapy goals and evaluate the process.

“The animal-assisted therapy supports existing treatment,” said Amundson. “It is another key to reaching and serving our clients, not an independent profession.”

(more)

The use of animal-assisted therapy is strictly optional. Clients that do not wish to have Lexi participate in their sessions can meet with Amundson alone. For now, this type of therapy is only available with Amundson.

Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center developed and implemented a formal procedure regarding the new therapy. This provides guidelines for issues such as pet allergies, permission requests, animal safety and other key areas.

Amundson said she thought the use of a dog as part of a formal treatment option is unique to the community. She added that credentialing is rigorous, and professionals using animal-assisted therapy must have the proper training and credentials for their professional practice.

“We see this as an opportunity to provide another level of therapy to the community,” said Patricia Carlson, executive director. “It offers a proven therapeutic effect for many of the issues that trouble people with mental health issues.”



### **About Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center**

Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center enhances the quality of life for residents in southeastern Minnesota by serving as a community resource for the understanding and treatment of behavioral health and substance use disorders. The organization collaborates with government agencies, schools, non-profit groups and others to provide programs dedicated to improving the mental health of adults, adolescents and children. Zumbro Valley Mental Health Center is a private, non-profit organization serving Olmsted and Fillmore counties. For more information, visit our Web site at [www.zumbromhc.org](http://www.zumbromhc.org) or call 507-289-2089.

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