

DOG'S LIFE

When it's time for a shot, send Rover right over

While their canine counterparts spend Saturdays playing in the park or snoozing on the sofa, Kiowa and Cheyenne are on duty – at the hospital. Their job: to comfort children waiting to be immunized.

"Petting the dogs helps take away some of the anxiety for the kids who are about to get their shots," explains Sandra Owen, who owns Kiowa and Cheyenne and coordinates pet therapy for Swedish Medical Center in Littleton, Colo., USA. "After they've had their shots, the dogs help them forget the pain."

Four Colorado Rotary clubs – Denver Tech Center, Englewood, Littleton, and University Hills – partnered with Swedish Medical Center in 2004 to create a Shots for Tots program to provide immunizations free of charge to uninsured children.

Prior to the program, Colorado was ranked 49th of the 50 U.S. states for its rate of immunized children. Shots for Tots has boosted the state to 13th place.

"These results prove that the program is worthwhile," says Darlee Whiting, former District 5450 PolioPlus Subcommittee chair and current chair of the local Shots for Tots program. "We are all afraid that childhood diseases such as chickenpox, measles, and even polio might come back if children don't have up-to-date immunizations. We want to prevent that from happening."

Most children who receive immunizations at the program's monthly clinics

are from low-income or uninsured families. For many of the families, English is not their first language.

"We have a huge Spanish-speaking population in Colorado," says Whiting. "We also see teenagers from other countries; at one clinic we immunized a teenager from Africa whose father was going to school in the United States."

Having Kiowa and Cheyenne at the Shots for Tots clinics has helped ease the fears of children who don't speak English, Owen says. "The connection they feel with the dogs transcends the language barrier."

– JODI HELMER

