

Pet Partners' Position on Therapy Animal Health and Welfare

Pet Partners is the nation's leading nonprofit registering handlers of multiple species as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions, which includes animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE). Our position on therapy animal health and welfare during animal-assisted interventions is centered on the concept of the handler being an animal's best advocate. Being an animal's advocate requires making decisions based on the preference of the animal, rather than the best interests of a client, researcher, professional, or healthcare team member. This means being attuned to not only the animal's needs for bathroom breaks, food, and water, but also to the animal's unique body language cues. The ability to successfully interpret what an animal is communicating is an uncompromising safety feature in responsible therapy animal visiting practice.

Considerations for Adoption Events

Considerations for commercial enterprises do not extend in the same way to adoption events where professionals are adopting out animals to give them a forever home. However, when an adoption event happens in conjunction with a commercial enterprise, it is paramount that these animals have an advocate present. These programs should keep in mind that juvenile animals are a vulnerable, fragile population and that early stressful experiences can create future behavioral challenges. Oftentimes, only one individual monitors a litter of animals, creating a situation where it is difficult to maintain the welfare of all individual animals.

Those working with juvenile dogs and cats should consider the following before proposing interactions:

- ▶ **Animal Health:** Animals that are less than 12 weeks old don't have fully developed immune systems. Prolonged stress can lead to immune system crash and subsequent illness.
- ▶ **Animal Travel:** Puppies and kittens are prone to soiling or possibly vomiting in their carriers. This tendency not only makes the animal unhappy and unsuitable for the day's visit but also might condition the animal to become anxious when traveling.
- ▶ **Visitation Safety:** Puppies and kittens often play "bite and scratch." Because they aren't fully reliable, predictable and controllable, their behavior can put clients at risk and lead to liability for the facility or animal.

Public events are an important way to raise awareness of animals needing homes. Pet Partners advocates that these events should be staffed by knowledgeable individuals who are able to monitor the welfare of participating animals as well as guide safe and positive interactions with clients.

About This Document

Pet Partners holds a variety of positions on therapy animal health and welfare that are not only important to our message and organization, but are also important to researchers, professionals, facilities, and the general public. The following position statements have been approved by Pet Partners' Human Animal Bond Advisory Board and Board of Directors.

