

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 Commercial Enterprises

Several commercial enterprises have begun to utilize animals in their facilities, either temporarily or permanently, promoting the concept of including animals for creating a positive and fun environment for clients and/or for financial gain. When animals are used in a commercial setting to attract customers or visitors, this is not an example of animal-assisted activities, therapy or education. Pet Partners does not support or encourage unsupervised and loosely controlled human-animal interactions that have the potential to contribute to a negative state of welfare for both parties involved. Pet Partners strongly maintains that in order for the welfare of the animal to be maximized at all costs, there must be an individual who is assigned the sole responsibility of acting as the animal's advocate, ensuring wellbeing, responding to body language cues, and supporting the animal in the event of a stressful situation. It is crucial that this individual is able to consistently and reliably recognize the animal's unique body language, which is often difficult with an animal the handler is not intimately familiar with. This is why Pet Partners requires someone to either own or work with an animal for at least six months before being eligible to register as a team.

In the event that a commercial enterprise chooses to incorporate animals into a public setting, Pet Partners suggests that a specific policy be in place to ensure that an animal is not only willing and able to interact with customers, but that the animal feels safe, is relaxed, and can be closely monitored during interactions by a knowledgeable individual. In addition to monitoring the animal's state, this individual should also aim to ensure safe contact with the animal and the customers by communicating proper species-specific touching, handling, and interaction. Implementing further responsibilities, such as making sure an animal has an ability to take a break or monitoring the number of people that are interacting with one animal at a time, are suggested.

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.

