

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 Facilities

Private or publicly owned facilities ranging from hospitals, nursing homes, veterans' centers, hospice, Alzheimer's facilities, courtrooms, and schools have begun to utilize a resident therapy animal in place of visiting therapy animal handler teams.

Facilities interested in incorporating a resident animal into their organization need to determine their specific program goals, target audience or client group, and visitation schedules and settings before pursuing the recruitment of therapy animals to ensure that the right type of animal is chosen. The animal should be screened for suitability as a therapy animal prior to placement. Most importantly, the animal must have a designated handler/owner who is not only intimately familiar with the animal's unique behavioral signals, but also acts as the animal's primary advocate during both the workday as well as after-hours.

It is strongly recommended that a facility interested in acquiring a resident therapy animal should form a multidisciplinary committee to discuss safety, infection control, and any other policies that are relevant to the therapy animal's presence. Within this committee, representative(s) knowledgeable in animal welfare (e.g., a veterinarian) need to create and maintain policies and procedures to ensure safe practice and proper treatment of the animal.

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.