

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 Licensed Professional Health and Human Service Providers

Private or publicly owned facilities ranging from hospitals, nursing homes, veterans' centers, Many clients can benefit from the inclusion of an animal into a goal oriented and structured therapeutic intervention. Animals have long proven to aid in a patient's recovery by reducing stress, decreasing blood pressure, and creating a positive atmosphere for the client.

Those interested in incorporating animal-assisted therapy as part of a professional application often partner with highly qualified handler teams such as with Pet Partners, but can also choose to recruit their own animal for AAT. In choosing an animal, it is important to keep in mind not every animal is well suited for therapy work or has been evaluated properly to ensure safe, effective visits for the client. Another consideration lies in who will maintain advocacy for the animal; if the professional's focus is maintained on the client throughout the session, who will manage the therapy animal's need for breaks, stimulation, and overall state of welfare? Without an advocate for the animal, it is possible that the animal's welfare could be unintentionally or intentionally compromised for the client's needs.

We strongly recommend that professionals consider utilizing a handler team for therapeutic interventions. Utilizing a handler team allows professionals to have someone who can attend to the animal's needs as they arise. It is the handler's responsibility to thoughtfully prevent situations that contribute to negative interactions between the client and animal, allowing the professional's focus to remain on the client.

Any professional planning on utilizing a Pet Partners handler team should begin by reviewing the Pet Partners policies and procedures that all volunteers abide by. Based on the unique needs of the facility, a professional will likely need to establish additional guidelines and procedures for the visiting animal program.

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.

