

Pet Partners' Position on Therapy Animal Health and Welfare

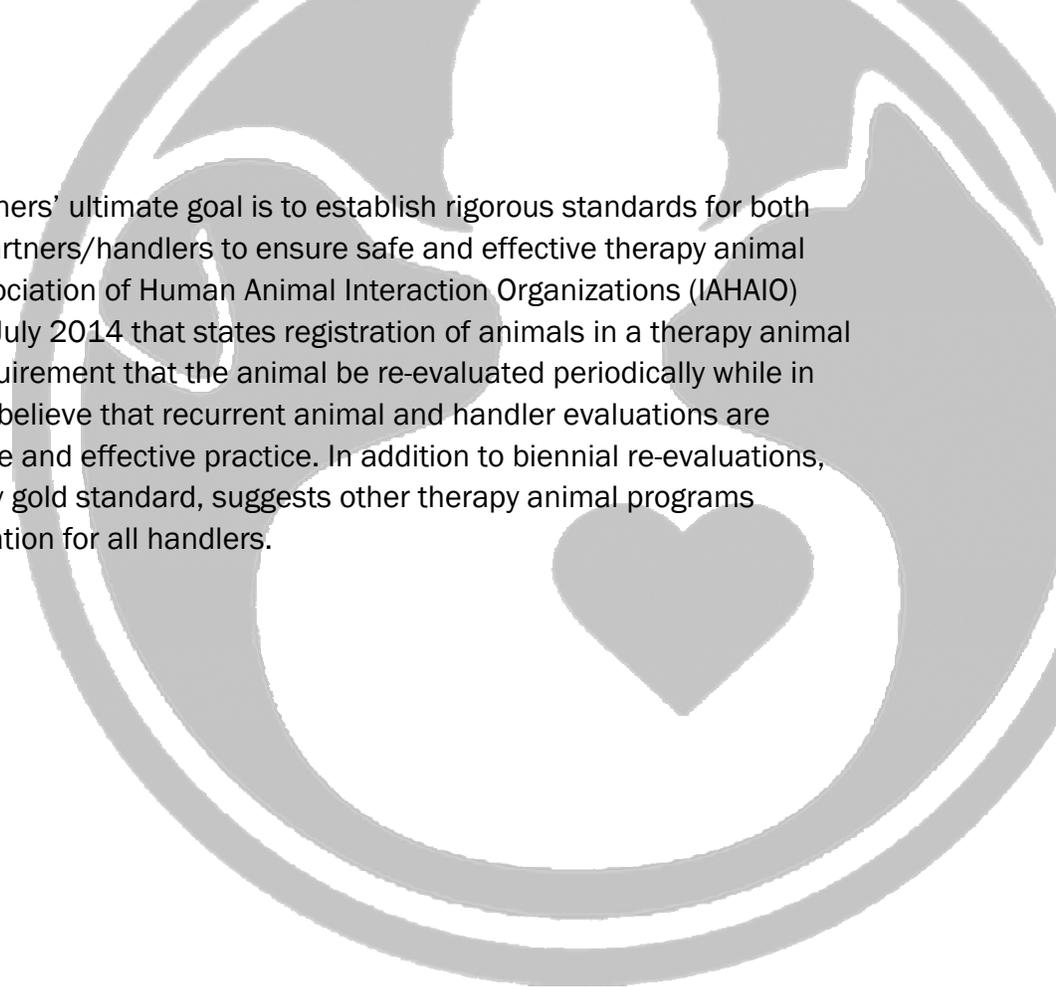
Pet Partners is the nation's leading nonprofit registering handlers of multiple species as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions, which includes animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE). Our position on therapy animal health 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.

The following are a set of welfare guidelines to keep in mind for any animal engaged in an AAI session:

- ▶ **Pre-visit preparation:** Allow the animal to relieve him/herself before the visit, in an area away from the entrance of the facility. Be sure to pick up waste and dispose of it properly.
- ▶ **Water:** Beware of not letting the animal overheat. Provide water periodically.
- ▶ **Safety first:** Never assume that an individual knows how to touch the animal appropriately. For the welfare and comfort of the animal during the visit, the handler will need to instruct or show adults or children how to pet the animal appropriately.
- ▶ **Visit lengths:** Begin with very short visits, and gradually increase the length. However, for safety and liability reasons, a team should visit a maximum of 2 hours per day.
- ▶ **Timeouts:** Remember that it is preferable to leave after a short time, even 5 minutes, if the animal is becoming stressed. A short, enjoyable visit is better than a prolonged visit that makes the animal uncomfortable.
- ▶ **Stress breaks:** During all parts of a visit, watch for the animal's unique body language cues, and pay attention to its level of comfort. The demands of visiting might lead the animal to need more frequent breaks. Therapy animals should be given the opportunity to relieve themselves a minimum of once per hour.
- ▶ **Other animals:** If other animals will be present, keep at a safe distance. If the animals are allowed to greet one another, the initial meeting is best done outside the facility. This includes resident animals.

Considerations for Therapy Animal Programs

The growth of animal-assisted interventions (AAI), including animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE), relies on the credibility, professionalism, and ethical standards of all those involved. By engaging animals to participate in therapy activities, it is our obligation to ensure an animal is both safe and content during interactions. For this reason, we believe that other therapy animal programs should adopt similar policies of animal advocacy for their organization.



As an organization, Pet Partners' ultimate goal is to establish rigorous standards for both animals and their human partners/handlers to ensure safe and effective therapy animal visits. The International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) published a [White Paper](#) in July 2014 that states registration of animals in a therapy animal program must include a requirement that the animal be re-evaluated periodically while in service. At Pet Partners, we believe that recurrent animal and handler evaluations are critical for maintaining a safe and effective practice. In addition to biennial re-evaluations, Pet Partners, as the industry gold standard, suggests other therapy animal programs encourage continuing education for all handlers.

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.