Orientation to Animal-Assisted Crisis Response
Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program

Published by Pet Partners, Bellevue, WA
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Purpose of this Document

As a Pet Partners volunteer, you have a wide variety of ways that you can make a difference in your community. It’s equally important that you select volunteer opportunities that are a good fit for your team and for which you have relevant training.

Many handlers are increasingly interested in animal-assisted crisis response (AACR) in the wake of extreme weather and acts of violence. The purpose of this document is to orient you to Pet Partners AACR so that you can determine whether you wish to become an AACR team.

Teams wishing to have a Pet Partners credential for AACR work, where insurance would apply, must have at least 6 months of experience as a therapy animal team before completing the online training and assessment available in the Training Center.

For now, you’re encouraged to review this document, learn more about AACR, and consider whether this might be the right fit for you and your therapy animal.
What is Animal-Assisted Crisis Response?

Animal-assisted crisis response (AACR) is a class of animal-assisted activities (AAA) which provides comfort to those who have been affected by natural, human-caused, or technological disasters.

Why is AACR effective? The safety, familiarity, novelty, and interest in the animal have been found to be impactful when building rapport with a person affected by crisis. The volunteer handler can then offer comfort, reduce anxiety, and provide the opportunity for contact and engagement, and when needed connect a client to emergency personnel and professionals for additional assistance.

AACR is not a professional mental health intervention. Pet Partners AACR handlers must complete training which includes psychological first aid concepts, sometimes also referred to as mental health first aid. Psychological first aid is a form of stabilization. Stabilizing individuals results in an environment where recovery can occur. AACR does not take the place of professional interventions, but you can provide support through listening, empathy, and sharing the unconditional love of your animal.

Checking for a Good Fit

Pet Partners therapy animal teams that have passed their team evaluation may volunteer in settings that align with their qualification rating. However, the Pet Partners AACR program requires additional training and documentation. Teams who complete these steps receive an AACR ID badge and Pet Partners branded gear, invitations to deployments, and Pet Partners insurance coverage during their AACR activities.

Is AACR right for you?

While therapy animal visits at hospitals, retirement homes, and schools have the potential to become stressful or emotionally challenging, AACR can be particularly intense. You’ll want to carefully consider whether AACR is an activity you and your therapy animal would enjoy. Therapy animal work, including AACR, should never be a detriment to you or your animal. You cannot help others if you are not taking care of your own team.
Ask yourself:

➤ Are you comfortable in situations where clients may be experiencing extreme emotions, including grief, misplaced anger, or dissociation?
➤ Have you had past crisis experience or personal trauma which might compromise your well-being if you are exposed to a similar situation as a volunteer?
➤ Are you interested in receiving and responding to deployment invitations which might be short notice?
➤ Are you able to objectively judge your animal’s body language in these higher stress situations and remove yourself should your animal indicate that need?
➤ Are you willing to follow all Pet Partners policies and procedures as well as a commitment to animal welfare, just as you do on typical visits, even when the need feels great or urgent?

Even if AACR seems like a good fit for your team broadly, once you’ve completed your training, you’ll still need to self-assess your current situation before any deployment.

Before You Deploy

You will never be pressured into visiting outside your level of comfort for yourself or your animal. With each deployment invitation you must determine whether that event is a good fit.

➤ Assess your animal’s current health and wellness. Are they healthy enough to participate? Are they rested and unstressed?
➤ Evaluate your therapy animal’s reaction and recovery to a previous AACR deployment. Is this still the right fit for your animal?
➤ Assess your own health and wellness. Is anything compromising your own well-being? Are you healthy, rested, and emotionally capable to undertake this work right now?
➤ Determine if there are special environmental considerations. Will you need to provide your own water? What will the exposure to elements be? Are you comfortable with the travel time considering possible traffic or detours?
➤ Review the possible health risks. Depending on the type of disaster, this could include pollution, smoke, or germs/contagion. Be aware of the level of risk and make the best decision for yourself and your animal.
The Pet Partners Approach to AACR

Policies and Procedures

Just as with any therapy animal visit, you are your animal’s advocate and a representative of Pet Partners and the larger field of animal-assisted interventions (AAI). All policies and procedures of the Therapy Animal Program still apply during AACR deployments, as well as our Code of Ethics and standards for professional behavior. These can be found in the Handler Guide as well as on the Pet Partners website.

Pet Partners is very clear that our focus on animal welfare does not change in AACR settings. We do not view therapy animals as tools. If anything, the potential for increased levels of stress in these settings require us to be more thoughtful about visit limits of 2 hours and necessary breaks for ourselves and our animals. YAYABA™ and PETS™ continue to be critical to the Pet Partners approach, as you cannot support anyone else if you cannot first support your pet.

Deployment

*Self-deployment* is when anyone shows up at the scene of a crisis with good intentions, but without an invitation. Self-deployment is not appropriate for any crisis responder, and for Pet Partners AACR teams, it’s expressly prohibited. Let’s explore why.

*By nature, disaster scenes are chaotic. By self-deploying, you would be adding to the chaos by not knowing where to go, who to talk to, how best to help, or where to direct others.*

*Self-deployment creates a risk of duplicate and unnecessary service. We want to assist as many people as possible and to direct resources where they will do the most good. Those who self-deploy don’t have access to this key information.***

*You may be turned away by law enforcement. Often disaster zones will be completely shut off to anyone other than residents and approved responders. Law enforcement works to restore order and protect lives and property. If we’re committed to helping others in distress, it’s best to not use law enforcement resources to turn away well-meaning self-deployers when they could be helping elsewhere.*

*Specific to Pet Partners, self-deployment could negate your insurance coverage.*
Can I only serve as an AACR team when Pet Partners directs me?
Self-deployment means showing up at the scene without being expressly invited. If Pet Partners alerts you to an event and you sign up for a specific date and time, that’s a clear invitation.

It is possible, particularly if you have an existing relationship with a facility, that you could receive a direct invitation to support a community in crisis. Be certain the invitation is coming from a person in a position to issue that invitation.

Pet Partners has a reputation for well-trained and professional volunteers. That professionalism extends to not self-deploying. Knowing that, let’s consider what the Pet Partners AACR model is based on.

Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Pet Partners has chosen a ‘neighbors helping neighbors’ model that minimizes the need for you and your animal to travel. We will send deployment invitations using a radius search in the area of the crisis event. As always, if the travel to respond to one of these events feels like it may be too long or taxing for your animal, be your animal’s advocate and decline the invitation. Our commitment to animal welfare does not change in AACR settings.

The neighbors helping neighbors model is based on the following principles:

- Extended travel is usually not in the best interests of your animal. While flying with your dog across country is an impressive gesture, there is stress as well as risk in travel for pets. If we are committed to being our animal’s best advocate at all times, we should acknowledge this.

- Bringing a team into a community that may be struggling with basic necessities is not the best use of local resources. Imagine a natural disaster that compromises drinking water, or one which creates an immediate need for temporary housing. How much is it helping when volunteers need to drink the bottled water and stay in the motel, like the people who just lost their homes?
Your Role

First and foremost, you are a therapy animal handler. In addition to conducting visits consistent with Pet Partners best practices including guiding interactions, practicing hand hygiene, and maintaining confidentiality, you are there to support and advocate for your animal. It is your responsibility to balance your animal’s best interests with your desire to help as well as the needs of the community.

As a Pet Partners AACR team, you are a resource for health and human service providers on site. You’re there to support people during an emotional time. You’re there to provide empathic listening and to share your animal. You are not a first responder, counselor, doctor, or therapist.

But what if you also hold one of these professional credentials? Then you must choose in what capacity you intend to respond to an event. You can either be present as an AACR team, or you can be present in your professional capacity deployed through another organization.

Let’s explore two examples of a handler who is also a professional practitioner.

1. **Sue is a trained physician.** She’s able to provide first aid during an emergency. But Sue understands she can’t meaningfully handle her animal and provide first aid at the same time. As a result, Sue chose to join her local community emergency response team (CERT) where she can use her medical expertise to assist during disasters. She can also be registered as a Pet Partners AACR team but decides which role is more appropriate for her on a case by case basis.

2. **Carlos is a licensed social worker.** He realizes that Pet Partners will be deploying teams for AACR, which is considered AAA. If he intends to practice AAT in his professional capacity, he knows his deployment will come elsewhere while his professional insurance is in play. He can still volunteer to provide AACR, but per the Code of Ethics, will operate within the appropriate role description.
How Does It Work?

We’ve covered that teams should never self-deploy to the site of a disaster, and you’re clear on your role, including your responsibility as your animal’s advocate. So how will this actually work, once you’re a Pet Partners AACR team?

How

Pet Partners can receive requests for AACR teams via our website or by phone. If a website request is made, a follow up phone call will occur to get additional information about the request. Pet Partners provides staff support to schedule the deployment of AACR teams free of charge to communities in need.

When

Once we have the specifics of the deployment, we’ll send an email to the volunteers in the community where the response is needed. Keep in mind you must be opted in to volunteer opportunities in your Pet Partners email preferences to receive these invitations. You can review and update your preferences in the Volunteer Center at any time.

Who

While one of the hallmarks of the Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program is registering nine species, requesters may place limitations or give us specific information that may inform the deployment. We will tailor our invitations accordingly, so you may not receive a deployment request that your neighbor receives if your team doesn’t fit the specified information for the deployment.

If you wish to accept a deployment, you’ll need to sign up. Some events may have limited spaces, making them a first come, first served opportunity. And afterwards, don’t forget to log your visit.

Where You Might Visit

It’s fair to say we hope you never have to deploy as an AACR team. We hope this isn’t something your community will have to experience. But if it does, there are a variety of settings you may deploy to.

AACR visits can occur at schools, community centers, or other places you currently visit, but let’s explore a few environments with which you might not be as familiar.
**Mobile Claim Sites:** Pet Partners has a relationship with some insurance providers to provide therapy animal teams at their mobile claims sites; these sites are where people come after an incident to file insurance claims. Typically operated out of RVs, the mobile claim sites are set up in stable public locations such as parking lots.

**General Population Shelters:** These shelters are a form of temporary housing where people in the affected area might be relocated to. Often located in schools, recreation centers, or other large facilities, typically these shelters have spaces for sleeping and eating.

**Service Centers:** These are places opened to meet the initial needs of disaster survivors. They might be locations people will visit to locate temporary housing or collect resources such as food/clothing/clean up materials.

**Family Reception Centers:** In the immediate aftermath of a disaster involving mass casualties or fatalities, these are temporary holding sites where individuals attempt to locate family and loved ones from whom they have been separated. These might be very near the disaster scene or in a healthcare facility where the injured have been transported.

**Family Assistance Centers:** Opened in the event of a disaster involving mass casualties or fatalities, these are centers that offer a range of services including mental health, spiritual care, crime victim services, law enforcement, disaster relief agencies, and access to other local, state, and federal agencies.

**Points of Dispensing (POD) Centers:** In the event of a public health emergency, these centers may be established to provide mass distribution of medications or vaccinations in an effort to prevent or mitigate the spread of a public health risk.

**Phone Banks:** Communities may set up a phone bank to address and respond to callers with questions that arise after a disaster. The individuals answering phones are often under stress and fatigued and may benefit from a visit from a therapy animal.

**Respite Centers:** These locations are places where first responders can rest and eat. They are usually opened where prolonged rescues and recovery efforts are necessary and are close in proximity to the disaster area. Again, therapy animals aren’t just for survivors—they can benefit responders as well.
Ready to Get Started?

To become an AACR team, you must be a current Pet Partners team with at least 6 months of visiting experience. Log in to the Volunteer Center and navigate to My Registrations. Click Become an AACR Team. When you've provided the requested information and paid your registration fee, the online coursework will be available in the Training Center.

When you have successfully completed your training, your registration will be processed, and you will receive an acceptance letter by email, followed by your badge and materials in postal mail.

What to expect from your training

Training will be completed online through the Volunteer Center. This training has been designed with input from subject matter experts in the field with the goal of taking your core therapy animal handling knowledge and building on it in a way that engages your critical thinking and problem-solving skills. All your learning will be contextual, through a series of scenarios that you might experience as an AACR team, allowing you to learn by doing.

► You’ll explore basic disaster concepts and best practices in crisis support, including psychological first aid.
► You’ll perform the key parts of every visit (approach, interaction, and closing) with clients in crisis situations.
► You’ll practice building rapport, active listening, and de-escalation techniques while maintaining appropriate boundaries.
► You’ll thoughtfully consider the importance of managing your own stress and providing yourself with care to avoid compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.

By covering this material in a role-playing–style course, we hope to give you an opportunity to think about the different ways you’ll respond to different situations and practice those skills.

Incident Command System and FEMA

Part of your training will include an introduction to the Incident Command System, or ICS. ICS is a standardized emergency management tool created using organizational best practices. It integrates facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications through a common organizational structure. This coordination allows for better management of resources.
FEMA offers a free deep dive online training in the Incident Command System. Pet Partners AACR teams will also complete this course as a final step in their training.

To access the FEMA coursework, visit:
https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/trainingmaterials.htm

What’s included in your AACR fee

- The initial online training
- AACR Badge
- Insurance coverage
- Access to members-only AACR discussion board within the Pet Partners online community
- Dedicated staff support for AACR deployments
- Targeted communications about deployment opportunities
- Ongoing webinars and continuing education
- Deployment kit which includes a polo shirt, jacket, backpack, water bottle and bowl

What to Wear on Deployment

For all therapy animal visits, teams should dress practically for the activities they will be participating in, including close toed shoes. In some AACR settings, additional layers or outerwear might be necessary. It is appropriate to inquire about conditions when you receive a deployment invitation to ensure you will be comfortable and prepared.

When you are deployed as a Pet Partners AACR team, it is imperative you be easily identified as Pet Partners with no confusion about your organizational affiliation. Therefore, teams must wear only Pet Partners gear including clothing for the handler and a vest or bandana for the animal. Clothing, badges, patches and other gear naming other therapy animal groups or AACR organizations is strictly prohibited. Your AACR fee covers the costs of your AACR deployment kit, which includes appropriately branded and easily identifiable gear. You’re welcome to wear other Pet Partners branded items you may already have as well.
In Closing

The primary purpose of this document has been to orient you to Pet Partners’ approach so that you can determine whether you wish to pursue AACR work. Just like with any visit you might undertake as a therapy animal team, this needs to be the right choice for both you and your animal.

Crisis response visits can be immensely rewarding, but they also may be more challenging. If you have questions or concerns, you’re always welcome to Contact Us. If you decide this is the right next step in your volunteering, we hope you find the training valuable and look forward to notifying you of upcoming deployment opportunities.