The Value of Broad Expertise in Our Field

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plus President’s Letter, Research Focus, Field Relations, Team Spotlight, and more
A Letter from the President & CEO Annie Peters

First year of the new decade or last year of the old decade—have we settled that debate yet? Whichever it is, it’s the first year of Pet Partners’ new three-year strategic plan and that’s what we’re focused on. The last three years were about our passionate volunteers, and working to be better able to meet your needs, as well as providing benefits to express our appreciation such as the Cancer Care Fund. We also focused on new initiatives such as Read With Me™, Walk With Me™, and Animal-Assisted Workplace Well-being; our biennial conference; and the launch of our Animal-Assisted Crisis Response program last year.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the additional education, found new ways to serve your community, and expressed your appreciation for the quality of the offerings. It is our role as your staff team to support you and your therapy animals.

So what are the priorities for the next three years? Our top priority is to increase the number of qualified therapy teams to meet the growing need. We recently heard from Michael Gross of Wisconsin and his beautiful golden retriever, Gigi. They were in the process of completing their first renewal when Michael told a staff member that he likes that Pet Partners has such high standards because it makes him even more proud of their affiliation. Of course, we love to hear that! But we also recognize that many people want to share the love of their pets without understanding the importance of standards for client safety and their animal’s welfare, and may opt for the path of least resistance.

Our education and evaluation do not make us the easiest organization to join; but we are proud that we are the gold standard in this field. The next three years will be focused on three major objectives:

- making sure people searching for a therapy animal organization find Pet Partners, whether online or active in their community;
- that prospective handlers and facility decision-makers understand why our high standards and rigor matter;
- and that we are accessible for those teams who can meet the high bar we’ve set.

Our other mission-related priority is to determine how we can best serve the needs of professionals practicing animal-assisted interventions. The desire to integrate AAI into professional practice is growing, but these professionals have no organized home for their educational needs related to AAI. And while they may be masters of their profession, we hear too many stories of well-intended professionals introducing an animal into a client interaction without understanding the importance of YAYABA™ and being your animal’s best advocate.

Whatever path we forge and whatever services we offer will be based on our current expert knowledge and developed in partnership with leaders in the field. If you are a professional practicing AAI, I encourage you to sign up for our newsletter for professionals at petpartners.org. The future starts with a landscape analysis and a dialogue. We recognize the importance of the work and the trust so many of you already place in us by taking our existing education. There is plenty of work to do, but what’s that saying about the view never changing unless you’re the lead dog?

Going back to our roots, Pet Partners has always taken the lead. When I started with this wonderful organization almost six years ago, many people in research and academia told me, “If it weren’t for Delta [now Pet Partners for our newcomers], my advisor never would have taken my interest in the human-animal bond seriously.”

The foundation the Delta Society offered launched a field. We’re so appreciative of the current leaders in research and academia who continue to move the field forward not only in their careers, but also as volunteers with Pet Partners as members of our Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board. Pet Partners “works” because of thousands and thousands of volunteers who passionately believe that together we are making the world better, one therapy animal visit at a time. You can wear that belief with this year’s T-shirt commemorating National Therapy Animal Day on April 30. This year, let’s celebrate all our wonderful therapy animals, but also each other and our shared work in AAI. After all, the animals can’t drive themselves to the facility for visits!
The Value of Broad Expertise in Our Field

Pet Partners volunteers bring a wide range of experience and expertise to their work in support of the human-animal bond.

by Elisabeth Van Every

Jane Kopelman has been involved with Pet Partners since the late 1990s. She’s been a therapy animal handler with four dogs, and became a team evaluator in 2002. Her work helping to create safe and effective therapy animal teams and bring the human-animal bond to people in New York has been invaluable in expanding the Pet Partners mission.

But Jane brings some special expertise to her work as a Pet Partners volunteer. She runs Animals for Adoption, a private rescue and shelter, which has given numerous dogs chances to find homes, and given her great insight into what can make for a good therapy dog. For the past several years she has worked with Green Chimneys, a nonprofit organization that connects young people with animals in a nontraditional educational setting; this experience has demonstrated for her how the power of the human-animal bond affects lives. And her experience as a Pet Partners volunteer informs her shelter and educational work, which feeds back into the benefits of the human-animal bond. She’s a great example of how different kinds of expertise support the wide range of work done by Pet Partners volunteers.

Despite this, the dog became a therapy dog. “You could not have met a more outgoing, social, trusting dog.”

Jane became involved with Green Chimneys about six years ago. At the time she got involved, the school had a service dog training program involving students, but the level of training required for service dogs wasn’t quite the right fit for the students. Green Chimneys was looking for an option that would still involve students in interacting with the dogs but would be a better fit. Jane proposed a basic-skills training program, allowing the students to train the dogs in basic obedience and socialization. This turned out to be the right blend of training to engage the students and fit with their abilities. Many of the dogs from her shelter will go to the program at Green Chimneys to get their basic skills before being made available for adoption.

Jane says the Green Chimneys program has multiple benefits. It helps dogs who may not have had much structure or positive attention learn the basic skills of...
being good pets, which increases their adoptability. It provides the students with opportunities to learn new skills of their own while working with the dogs, and to get the benefits of interacting with dogs as part of the program. And it demonstrates for people who might be skeptical about rescue dogs that they aren’t limited by their backgrounds; Jane notes that many people have preconceived ideas about the challenges of rescue dogs and the likelihood of bad behavior, but the work they do with Green Chimneys students shows that this doesn’t have to be the case for all rescue dogs.

The basic skills program has been so successful, for the students and the dogs, that Jane is now working on a vocational skills program that would provide an additional level of training for suitable dogs. This program would take dogs who show potential as therapy or facility dogs and have the students train them in skills they’ll need to function successfully in these settings. It uses Jane’s expertise as a handler, team evaluator, and animal rescue worker to create a program that will identify dogs who are a good fit for this kind of activity and build their skills further, while supporting the Green Chimneys students in an expansion of their abilities.

And Jane isn’t merely setting up these programs—she also uses them. Her current therapy dog Shep was a stray that Jane’s shelter rescued in Arkansas. Shep went through the basic skills program at Green Chimneys, and Jane adopted her. Jane continued to work with Shep in developing her abilities and interests, determining what might be a good fit for the dog; it took about four years for Shep to fully come into herself and her capabilities, with Jane’s expert guidance and loving care. Now Shep works with Jane as part of a Pet Partners therapy animal team.

Everything Jane does in this realm has made her a better handler and a better therapy animal team evaluator. Her expertise means she understands the roads some dogs take to becoming therapy animals, and what makes a dog a great therapy animal. “I’m a believer that you can train a dog, work with a dog to teach the skills they need, but it’s important to look at behavior and say ‘This dog would REALLY enjoy being a therapy dog’ versus something else,” she says. “Some training will produce an excellent obedience dog, but won’t produce a dog with the curiosity and confidence to be a therapy dog.” She notes that while obedience is important for therapy dogs, therapy animal team evaluations aren’t obedience competitions; they’re a gauge of the team’s abilities and the animal’s suitability. “You have to be open to looking at the dog as an individual. Make it fun for the dog. I’m all about the teamwork and the dog loving it.”

Jane Kopelman is just one example of the broad range of expertise and experience that Pet Partners volunteers bring to our Therapy Animal Program and their work. The tens of thousands of volunteers who bring therapy animals to their communities and support AAI in multiple forms all have unique skills and backgrounds that strengthen our mission. We’re grateful for this broad base of experience, and for the work of every Pet Partners volunteer.

Veterinary Advisor: Dr. Scott Weese

The value of expertise to our mission is also evident in the professionals who provide their time and expertise to support our work. Pet Partners is fortunate to have Dr. Scott Weese serving as our primary veterinary advisor for the Therapy Animal Program, as well as a member of our Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board. A veterinary internist and a public health/zoonotic disease microbiologist, Dr. Weese has authored or co-authored over 350 papers in peer reviewed journals, edited three books, and speaks extensively on infectious disease topics.

He is a professor at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph; Director of the University of Guelph’s Centre for Public Health and Zoonosis; and Chief of Infection Control at the Ontario Veterinary College Health Sciences Centre.

Dr. Weese is also the author of the Worms & Germs Blog, a resource dedicated to promoting safe pet ownership. You’ll find a wide variety of articles written for the layperson about infectious diseases of companion animals, urban wildlife, and exotic pets, with an emphasis on zoonotic diseases, those which can be transmitted between animals and people. Read the blog at wormsandgermsblog.com.

Dr. Weese’s expertise helps inform our Therapy Animal Program policies on animal health, including medications, illnesses and chronic conditions, vaccination, and diet. He is an invaluable resource supporting the rigor that makes our program the gold standard in the field. We’re honored to have Dr. Weese offering his knowledge to help support safe and effective therapy animal visits.
Chances are you’ve seen in your own life the unique ways in which pets and children connect. Perhaps your love of animals began in your own childhood, with sweet memories of growing up alongside a furry friend. As the field of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) develops, support for the special bond between animals and children is growing, moving beyond anecdotal testimonies and being bolstered by empirical evidence.

As we seek to better understand the power of the human-animal bond, researchers continue to investigate the impact of animals in specific populations. Through these studies, we can better appreciate the implications that AAI has when it is intentionally applied within distinct groups of people. One application in which animals are gaining significant notice relates to their therapeutic involvement with children who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The findings in this area are vast, as AAI has proven to be correlated with improvements across a wide range of variables for people with ASD. Many research findings point to ways in which therapy animals help set the stage for learning for children with ASD. In a four-year longitudinal study, animal interactions in the classroom were associated with increased adaptive behavior in students. Similarly, a 2019 study found that therapy dogs reinforced children with ASD, prompting them to be more responsive in the learning environment.

There is also extensive evidence to suggest that therapy animals promote social development for children with ASD. Dr. Maggie O’Haire, a member of the Pet Partners Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board, conducted a thorough literature review on this topic. In reviewing the empirical data related to AAI in this population, Dr. O’Haire found that the intervention was commonly associated with increases in social functioning, correlating with variables such as enhanced social skills, awareness, and social motivation. Another study conducted by Dr. O’Haire built upon the findings of her literature review, revealing that children with ASD were more likely to display social behaviors such as talking, physical contact, and enhanced social receptivity while in the presence of a companion animal.

Even in particularly stressful settings, AAI has been deemed beneficial in prompting socialization for young people with ASD. When investigated within the context of psychiatric hospitalization, the presence of a dog promoted social-communication behaviors for patients with ASD, suggesting the efficacy of the intervention even in the most complex environments.

Dogs are not the only species represented in this body of work. Many other animals, large and small, are commonly incorporated in therapy for children with ASD. A 2018 review of the literature on the therapeutic impact of horses on children with ASD found that participants who worked with therapy horses demonstrated improved behavior, social interaction, and communication, while also displaying fewer stereotypical ASD behaviors. In a different study, guinea pigs took center stage and were determined to positively influence both the quality and quantity of the social behavior of autistic children.
The bond between an animal and a child with ASD is powerful, even when considered outside of intentionally delivered therapy, and even potentially for a child’s loved ones. A 2016 study that considered the entire family system found that the inclusion of a pet in the family of a child with ASD might have positive implications on all members of the household. In the experiment, one group of families adopted a dog and the other group of families did not, allowing researchers to monitor different variables of interest over the course of almost three years. Interestingly, the families who had adopted a dog demonstrated improvements in family functioning with significantly fewer incidences of family difficulties as compared to the families with no household pet.²

While the existing body of literature on the intersection of AAI and ASD is promising, there is considerable room for further investigation. To better understand the power of pets in this population, researchers have made a call for larger, randomized studies that will help shed light on the precise variables that should be used to best measure the impact of AAI for children with ASD.⁶,⁷

Pet Partners is committed to aiding in this process. We are proud to support continued research through financial investment in grant opportunities, collaboration with scholar-practitioners and organizations such as the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, and assistance in recruiting of participants for studies so that Pet Partners teams are represented in the literature. We know first-hand the healing power of pets, and we are excited for all that is to come as we work with researchers who help bolster our efforts with empirical validation of the intervention that is at the heart of our mission.

References

8. Talarovičová, A., Olexová, L., & Kršková, L. (2010). Guinea pigs—The “small great” therapist for autistic children, or: do guinea pigs have positive effects on autistic child social behavior?. Society & Animals, 18(2), 139-151.
The Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program has such powerful impact because of the work done by our volunteers within their communities. This includes our Community Partners and Community Groups, who bring their unique knowledge of their local communities and the effect of a cohesive group to their efforts as Pet Partners volunteers. This kind of community-based expertise is vital to how our volunteers serve the specific needs of where they live.

When we revived our AAI conference in 2017, we felt that it offered an excellent opportunity to also connect with our community-based volunteer groups. We held our first Community Partner Town Hall the day after the 2017 conference.

It provided an excellent opportunity for group leaders and Pet Partners staff to connect and discuss vital issues such as group structure, branding, and ways for Pet Partners to provide more effective support to local groups. This first Town Hall led to a great deal of productive conversation and progress, so we held a second Town Hall after our 2019 conference.

The second Town Hall was so successful that we decided we don’t want to wait until our 2021 conference to continue the momentum: Pet Partners will be holding a 2020 Town Hall for our community-based groups in Dallas later this year!

The previous Town Halls were limited by which group members were also able to attend the conferences. This time, we want to ensure broad participation and make it easy for every group to have representation at the event. This Town Hall is open to any member of any formally recognized Pet Partners Community Partner or Community Group who would like to attend. And Pet Partners will reimburse travel costs for one member of each Community Partner or Community Group, to ensure that every recognized Pet Partners group will have a chance to be part of the conversation.

This investment in our community-based groups and the work they do will strengthen mission delivery, and help Pet Partners staff do more to support these groups where they live and work. It’s another way for us to bring the human-animal bond to more people.

Pet Partners Happenings

Our twice-monthly email newsletter delivers the most recent news from Pet Partners right to your inbox!

Get the latest information on our Therapy Animal Program, advocacy, research, special events, and more, along with highlights from our blog, a featured therapy animal team, and Pet Partners in the news.

Go to petpartners.org to subscribe!
On January 19, Pet Partners joined thousands of others in mourning a great ambassador of therapy animal work: ParkerPup, the renowned golden retriever actor, model, and cancer care advocate who was also a longtime Pet Partners therapy dog.

Parker and his handler, Dan McFarling, first became a Pet Partners team in 2012. They had a particular interest in visiting with cancer patients, as Dan had dealt with an aggressive form of cancer himself. According to Parker’s family, “Giving back to those who are fighting for their lives is therapeutic not only to the patients, but also to the therapy team, who knows what it’s like and who has ‘been there.’” They visited regularly at four hospitals in the greater Portland, OR area, and also made visits to other facilities by request when their schedule allowed. Parker’s happy personality and affection for everyone made him a welcome presence, and Dan’s empathetic understanding of what it’s like to be a patient brought comfort and connection during their visits. They made excellent ambassadors for the value of animal-assisted interventions in healthcare. They were also involved in other aspects of AAI, including a reading program at the Beaverton Library, crisis response in their community, and an early pilot of our Animal-Assisted Workplace Well-being initiative. They loved to share about their therapy animal visits on their social media and in other media appearances, bringing attention to the valuable work they were doing and how AAI can improve health and well-being for humans.

Dan and Parker were generous to Pet Partners as well, modeling for photos and taking part in our 40th anniversary video in 2017. They allowed a video crew to come on a visit and beautifully demonstrated for a wide audience the effect that a therapy dog could have on someone with health challenges. Parker’s happy face during visits and the joy of people visiting with him were great symbols of Pet Partners and how our mission affects people all over the world.

When Parker left the world that January night, he left behind a grieving family and thousands of supporters who appreciated him and mourned his passing. But he also left behind a profound legacy of lives touched through his therapy animal visits. His little brother Gill is following in Parker’s footsteps as a therapy dog, making visits with Dan. And Pet Partners will always be grateful to Parker for his work as a therapy dog, his advocacy for AAI, and the countless lives he improved through his presence.

**CAN YOU DO MORE? BECOME AN EVALUATOR**

- Are you a handler with 18 months of volunteer experience? If so, you are eligible to apply and may already have the basic aptitude to successfully evaluate other teams.
- Can you give a few days a year to make it possible for more volunteers to share their wonderful companion animals with their communities?
- Pet Partners team evaluators play a critical role in growing and sustaining therapy animal visits in their communities.
- We have designed accessible, innovative, and supportive coursework that will prepare you to take on this role.

If you’re ready to be a volunteer leader, get in touch at petpartners.org/contact-us
Pet Partners is pleased to announce the recipient of the 2019 Magic Award, Rhona Meeks. The Magic Award is a scholarship established by Dr. Aubrey Fine, chair of the Pet Partners Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board, to assist a Pet Partners volunteer in continuing their professional development in animal-assisted interventions. Rhona was chosen as the 2019 recipient for her efforts in integrating AAI into her work with homeless teens in New Mexico, as she pursues an MA in counseling from Adams State University.

Rhona is a case manager at Dreamtree Project in Taos, New Mexico, which offers emergency shelter and support services to homeless teens and youth in crisis ages 12–17. According to Rhona, young people are often referred to Dreamtree because something has gone wrong at home. “It can be a lonely, traumatizing, and frightening experience,” she says. Many of these youth have experienced trauma and abuse along with homelessness, and the support they receive at Dreamtree can be vital to healing.

Rhona’s interest in AAI was sparked after seeing how youth responded positively to her dog Winnfield when she brought him to work with her. She was particularly struck by Winn’s effect on one young person. “She was suffering from depression and did not want to get out of bed or interact with anyone,” Rhona says. “She loved animals, so we would go out on hikes together with my dog. At the time these outings were one of the only things that got her out of her shell and engaged with the world.”

After seeing how Winn was able to draw positive emotions out of the kids in the program, Rhona decided to look into formally incorporating AAI into her work. “I knew Winnfield had the capacity to be a good therapy animal. I did some research and found out about Pet Partners. I wanted to see if I could bring this kind of therapy to Dreamtree in a more official capacity.” Rhona and Winn became a Pet Partners team in 2019.

Rhona has seen multiple benefits of AAI in the youth she works with. One is that animals are non-judgmental. “When struggling teens interact with Winnfield, they are experiencing connection without having to explain their circumstances, or even talk at all,” she says. Another benefit is neurobiological; petting or playing with a dog has been shown to lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety. “When our youth are interacting with Winn they get to take a break from their stress and focus on something outside of themselves for a while.”

There’s also the connection that many of the Dreamtree clients make with animals. “When I bring Winnfield, the youth start telling me about their own dogs and cats,” Rhona says. “Talking about happy memories and thinking of their own animals seems to evoke positive thoughts and builds connection.”

And there is motivation to exercise and get outside. “It can be easy for our youth to lose motivation. Although they are usually not very enthusiastic about going for a hike, this can be turned into a more exciting outing if we are taking Winnfield for a walk,” Rhona says. Exercise and fresh air are known to be beneficial for both physical and mental health, “so promoting this at Dreamtree is something I have been delighted to do.”

Rhona’s experiences with Winnfield at Dreamtree have her excited about using AAI as part of a broader clinical practice. “I have noticed that when dogs are present, people tend to feel more at ease. I can see how including a therapy animal in a counseling session could offer emotional support and help them feel more comfortable talking about their problems.” She plans to use Winnfield as her “wingman” in her practice as a counselor after completing her degree, having him available to support her work when appropriate. “It would depend on each individual, but I am sure there will be times when I will need Winnfield’s help to assist in that journey to healing.” She’s also preparing her dog Tinkerbell for possible therapy animal work.

Rhona will use the Magic Award to assist in the costs of her schooling, and to help build a personal library of AAI-related literature. “This will contribute to my understanding of AAI as it relates to counseling,” she says. “I will be more prepared for including it as part of my ‘tool kit’ as a therapist.”

Rhona’s dedication in bringing AAI to her work with homeless youth and her intention to integrate it into her future practice is an example of how supporting professional development in AAI is so important. Congratulations to Rhona, and thanks to her and Winnfield for their work.

Take The Lead: The Pet Partners Blog

Our new blog, Take The Lead, provides in-depth coverage of Pet Partners programs, AAI research, mission-focused events, stories about the human-animal bond, and more.

petpartners.org/blog
It’s Time to Bake a Difference!

In honor of National Therapy Animal Day coming up on April 30, Pet Partners supporters all over the country will be bringing pets and people together in the sweetest way by participating in Treats & Sweets Day for Pet Partners. Learn more and sign up at treatsandsweetsday.org.

Participants will receive a free Baker Start-Up Kit in the mail, which includes stickers, a poster, and a table sign to help you put together a great baking event. More decorations and templates are available at treatsandsweetsday.org.

Bakers who raise $50 or more will receive a pet bandanna, and those who raise $100 or more will receive the bandanna and our official Treats & Sweets Day T-shirt!

Your efforts support thousands of therapy animal teams who make millions of life-enhancing visits each year. Go to treatsandsweetsday.org to sign up and get started baking a difference.

Save the Date for the World’s Largest Pet Walk

The third annual World’s Largest Pet Walk will take place on September 26, 2020!

Whether you lead a walk in your community, host a workplace event, gather some friends and family for a casual stroll around the block, or take a nature hike that’s just you and your animal, we want to see our Pet Partners community taking steps with their pets. This walk is open to anyone who wants to support Pet Partners!

There’s no fee required to participate, but we do invite you to set up an individual or team fundraising page (coming soon!). And we ask that you share your photos with us and spread the word on social media, so that everyone can know about this event to promote walking with pets.

Those who fundraise will be eligible for some fun incentives including shirts and pet bandannas. Look for more information in email and social media, and visit petpartners.org later this year for details.

In 2019 there were walks in hundreds of communities across the country and around the world. Let’s make 2020 our largest pet walk yet!

#WorldsLargestPetWalk   #PetPartners
Meet the Pets: Bringing Therapy Animals to Congress

On November 13, 2019, Pet Partners brought therapy animals to Congress with a new event: Meet the Pets.

Hosted in conjunction with the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), this event gave members of Congress, their staff, and other people on Capitol Hill the opportunity to interact with some Pet Partners therapy animal teams, and to learn about the value of animal-assisted interventions and the work that Pet Partners and our teams do.

Rep. Kendra Horn of Oklahoma spends some quality time with therapy dog Hart

The event ran from 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m., to give plenty of opportunity for people to visit with the teams. There were three shifts scheduled to ensure that the dogs didn’t get too tired or stressed from meeting a lot of people, as part of demonstrating our commitment to high standards and animal welfare. Lawmakers, staff, and others were invited to visit with the teams as they had time.

And the reaction from elected officials and staff was extremely positive! People in suits were lying on the floor petting the therapy dogs, taking selfies, and chatting with the handlers to learn more about Pet Partners and the many ways therapy animals are improving human health and well-being in communities all across the country.

One of the goals of Pet Partners is to educate the public about therapy animals and the power of the human-animal bond, and to help ensure that laws that affect standards and access for therapy animals are created with a solid base of information. Our grassroots advocacy efforts focus on bringing this information to lawmakers to help them in crafting sound policies around animal-assisted interventions. Bringing Pet Partners teams to Capitol Hill was a great opportunity to provide this education to federal lawmakers in a hands-on way.

“While reading and hearing about the benefits of the human-animal bond is important, there is no substitute for experiencing the power of therapy animals firsthand,” says Chief Mission Officer Mary Margaret Callahan. “We were thrilled to bring therapy animal teams to the U.S. Capitol to provide not just stress relief, but also education.”

Pet Partners dog teams set up shop in the Hart Senate Office Building and the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill, with three teams at each building.

As they took a few minutes to pet the dogs, officials took time as well to thank the Pet Partners handlers not only for being there on the Hill, but also for the positive impact the Pet Partners teams have in their own communities visiting hospitals, assisted living, VA facilities, schools, and more.

Anyone can be a Pet Partners advocate! Sign up to help educate lawmakers about AAI and support standards and access for therapy animals. For more information visit petpartners.org/advocacy.
In January, Pet Partners Evaluator and Instructor Support Specialist (and resident cat lady) Moira Smith represented Pet Partners at The Acatemy's 2nd annual conference, hosted by The Cat Hustler. This special event welcomed over 200 of the mid-Atlantic area's hardest working feline advocates. Most of the vendors and presenters were from the animal welfare and rescue community; Moira was happy to be back with ‘her people’ since leaving a previous position with the ASPCA in New York. In her presentation, she spoke about how turning a rescue cat into a therapy cat can be a great community outreach tactic for cat rescue organizations.

Rescue folks aren’t typically focused on the super friendly cats who are considered ‘low hanging fruit’ in terms of adoptability. Moira wanted to demonstrate how these special felines could be another tool in the rescuer’s toolbox, by acting as ambassadors to change the hearts and minds of those who may not have considered adopting a cat due to myths and misunderstandings. She shared tips and wisdom on how to identify a potential therapy cat in a shelter and use that potential to draw interest to cats who might otherwise be overlooked, such as senior cats and cats with disabilities. Moira’s presentation was well-received, and increased interest among attendees about therapy cat registration. She spoke with several potential cat handlers who are located in the greater Washington, DC area. Moira and her support team are working hard to license new Pet Partners team evaluators in the region, so that these dedicated cat people can become part of our Therapy Animal Program and bring the joy of therapy cats to their communities.

Pet Partners teams met some of the players taking part in the Farmers Insurance Open to provide some calm moments before the tournament started, and to spread the word about therapy animals and our work alongside Farmers in response to disasters. Teams including Dakota and handler Lara did a great job showing people the positive effects of therapy dogs! Thank you to the PGA and to Farmers Insurance for having us again this year.

Pet Partners President & CEO C. Annie Peters was recently invited to take part in Elanco Animal Health’s popular podcast “ Rediscovering the Power of Healthy Animals.” Annie shared how animals help bolster social connection, health, and well-being. Our pets truly have the power to encourage togetherness among families, friends, and communities.

Pet Partners continues to work with a variety of partners and organizations to raise awareness about the many different species of therapy animals we register.

• We teamed up with Bird Enjoyment & Advantage Koalition (BEAK) to celebrate National Pet Bird Day on September 17.

• President & CEO C. Annie Peters was a keynote speaker at the Greater Appalachian Llama and Alpaca Association (GALA) conference in Pennsylvania in October.

• Moira Smith, Pet Partners Evaluator and Instructor Support Specialist, promoted cats as therapy animals at The Acatemy, a conference presented by The Cat Hustler in Dulles, VA in January—see the sidebar for more about this great event.
Pet Partners has a brand-new website that makes it simple for you to create a customized fundraiser to support Pet Partners.

The Fundraise for Pet Partners website at petpartners.org/fundraise allows you to create a fundraising page, customize it with stories and photos, email supporters, and collect donations. You can hold any kind of fundraiser you like, and we’ve created templates to make setting up your fundraising page a snap.

Here are a few reasons people hold Pet Partners fundraisers:

• Honoring a person or pet
• Celebrating a therapy animal’s retirement
• Birthday parties for pets or people

When you fundraise for Pet Partners, you not only provide financial support for therapy animal visits, you also spread the word about the impact of the human-animal bond. Please visit petpartners.org/fundraise to get started!

Rennie Karnovich remembers the visit at Phoenix Children’s Hospital when she and Lucy, her therapy dog, entered the hospital room of a young patient. The child’s mother informed Rennie that the child was immobile. Rennie lifted Lucy to the side of the bed, and slowly, the child’s hand inched out from underneath the sheet to rest on Lucy’s head. That pivotal moment caused the patient’s mom to start crying; and that meaningful visit has stayed with Rennie.

Rennie has been involved with the Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program since 2006. Rennie works at Phoenix Children’s Hospital in the IT Department, where she serves as a Business Systems Analyst helping staff navigate computer applications. Although Rennie works full-time at the hospital, she and Lucy continue to make weekly volunteer visits to patients.

This dynamic duo makes a positive impact on those they visit, but Rennie is also committed to sharing her love of therapy animals by including Pet Partners in her estate plan. Rennie is supporting the future of therapy animal work by naming Pet Partners as a beneficiary of her life insurance policy. Rennie commented that there was no paperwork involved—it was as simple as adding Pet Partners on a beneficiary form.

Pet Partners is appreciative of individuals who have named the organization in their estate plan. This thoughtfulness allows Pet Partners to continue to grow and to serve more people.

Naming Pet Partners in a life insurance policy as a beneficiary of a percentage of the policy is simple. Contact the administrator of your policy to add a beneficiary. Pet Partners’ tax ID is 91-1158281.

For more information visit petpartners.giftlegacy.com.
I heard that Pet Partners recently introduced background checks for volunteers. Could you tell me more about this?

A: Pet Partners is committed to bringing safe visits conducted by highly qualified teams to all facilities. Safety and liability are concerns for all organizations working with volunteers, and many facilities want reassurance that handlers as well as animals visiting at their facilities will offer minimal risk.

By having a background check performed as part of the Pet Partners registration process, facilities will have the assurance that volunteers registered with us have a background that does not preclude them from visiting at the time their acceptance letter is issued. This is one more way we can support the high standards of our Therapy Animal Program and demonstrate that animal-assisted interventions can be safe and reliable.

As of July 1, 2019, all Pet Partners volunteer handlers, instructors, and evaluators who live in the United States (not including Puerto Rico and any territories) and who are at least 18 years old will need to complete a background check. Volunteers who live in Canada or internationally will not need to undergo a background check at this time.

Pet Partners has contracted with Sterling Volunteers to conduct the background checks, which will be done as part of the registration process. The background check will be initiated when all registration materials have been submitted.

Background checks will be conducted once every two years at minimum. All new volunteers will undergo a background check as part of their new registration; volunteers with current registrations will have a background check done when they renew a registration or license, or register with a new animal.

The cost of background checks is covered by Pet Partners. Volunteers participating in a background check as part of their initial registration or registration renewal will not be charged for the check.

Background check information will remain confidential, and only select Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program staff will have access to the results. Volunteers will be able to access the results of their own background checks, and may choose to share these results with facilities where they visit.

Please note that individual facilities may still have their own background check requirements that are not addressed by the Pet Partners background check. Volunteers will still need to meet any requirements for facilities where they visit.

Current and prospective Pet Partners volunteers who would like more information about background checks can find that in the Resource Library of the Volunteer Center at petpartners.org. Log in to your Pet Partners account and search for “background check.” Facilities who would like to know more about background checks and other program policies that help ensure safe and effective visits can learn more on our website; visit the Pet Partners at Your Facility page.

Adding background checks to the requirements for Pet Partners registration is one more way that we demonstrate the rigor and high standards that make our Therapy Animal Program the gold standard in the field. We’re proud to support safe and effective therapy animal team visits.

Do you have a question on a topic that would be of interest to a broad audience? Send it for consideration to editor@petpartners.org.

If you need an immediate response, please contact Pet Partners at petpartners.org/contact-us.
April 30 is National Therapy Animal Day! Pet Partners is offering a new limited-edition shirt design: *Making the world better, one therapy animal visit at a time!*

Join us in celebrating our therapy animals who partner with their human companions to bring comfort and healing to those in need. Shirts come in a variety of styles, colors, and sizes, and are only available for a limited time! Go to bonfire.com/2020-national-therapy-animal-day to order yours.