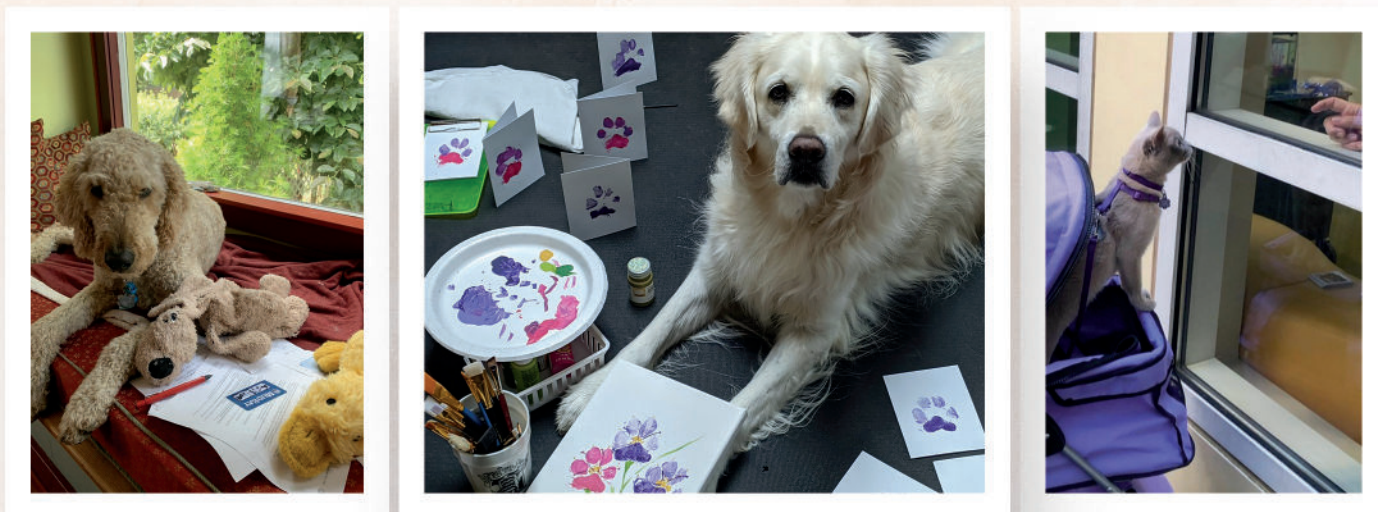


Pet Partners

INTERACTIONS MAGAZINE

STORIES OF LIVES IMPROVED BY POSITIVE HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS



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Pet Partners
Touching Lives, Improving Health



Pet Partners
Touching Lives, Improving Health

The Pet Partners mission is to improve human health and well-being through the human-animal bond.

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PUBLICATION CREDITS:

Managing Editor: Elisabeth Van Every

Contributors: Mary Bohmke; Taylor Chastain Griffin, PhD; Brynna Counts-Morgan; Ashley Drew; Jesse Haas; C. Annie Peters; Traci Pryor; Charis Tarbett; Elisabeth Van Every

Photos provided by: Pet Partners unless otherwise specified

Graphic Design: Laxman2creative

Copyediting: Linda Dicus, Allison Younger

A Letter from President & CEO

C. Annie Peters

As I sit writing this, it's been "five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes," to borrow a lyric from the acclaimed Broadway show *Rent*, since we were scrambling to understand something called COVID-19. There was no doubt that our wonderful therapy animal teams and the people they visit would be impacted. It took a little time, but we successfully shifted from being reactive to operating in a proactive manner.

A few months into the pandemic, we had a leadership team meeting and recognized that to all be on the same page for planning, we needed to agree on an "end date," or a timeframe when things might begin to return to more typical activity. Sharing everything we had read and heard from reliable sources, we settled on March 2021 as that date, and communicated the changes to volunteer registration duration accordingly. While we were a little optimistic on that, here we are on a noticeable path to return to so many activities we hold dear. We hope that the advent of spring can propel us forward!

This issue is full of so many positive, creative ideas that came out of a difficult time, many of which will have long-lasting benefits. We talk frequently about a concept that had not been given a name pre-pandemic: animal-related engagement. I applaud all our innovative volunteers who found new ways



to stay engaged. Virtual and alternative visits are here to stay! And we have adapted our processes without impacting the rigor of our evaluation by developing outdoor evaluation protocols, as well as virtual training for those who choose to step into the role of team evaluator. You can read more about all of this in this issue.

The last year has been monumental for another reason, as we bring our focus to the critical importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). To be frank, we have

10,000 passionate volunteers, but lack diversity in our handler community. We are taking a hard look at why this is so, and look forward to sharing what we learn with our Community Partners and Community Groups. I invite any of our volunteers or donors with ideas and suggestions on how we can do our part to email me directly at president@petpartners.org. And we have made a statement about our commitment to this on our website and to our volunteers and board members.

We also need to do a better job of gathering data about who we are serving. Our volunteers should be on the lookout for more information about this in emails this year. In my role I have the opportunity to shadow many visits and see volunteers serving their diverse communities in schools, hospitals, and college campuses. This is genuine and wonderful; but role models matter too, and we want to be able to provide those for everyone who is interested in providing AAI. There is much work to be done, and we look forward to doing it.

So "how do you measure a year in the life"? Well, "how about love"? I cannot wait to see all the photos and hear all the stories about our amazing therapy animals getting back to what they do best: sharing their love!

— Annie

Our Species are Diverse, Our Volunteers Should be Also

At Pet Partners, our volunteers serve diverse populations of people with any of the nine species of animals we register. We are committed to creating a volunteer force that is more representative of the populations we serve. We welcome unique perspectives and experiences in terms of national origin, culture, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, race, color, sex, gender identity and expression, education, age, languages spoken, veteran status, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and beliefs, which help us strengthen our impact.

Innovation and the Future of Therapy Animal Visiting

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a wave of adaptations and new ideas to support therapy animal visitation now and in the future

by Elisabeth Van Every

2020 was an extraordinary year for the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like everyone, Pet Partners and our volunteers were significantly affected. We were able to adjust in numerous ways and continue providing the benefits of therapy animal visits through alternatives such as virtual visits and animal-related engagement (ARE) activities. These options provided a bridge to ensure the human-animal bond could be maintained despite the restrictions of the pandemic.



Photo provided by GERALYN HAWK.

As 2021 approached, we recognized that pandemic risks and restrictions won't necessarily be going away completely, and therapy animal visitation will need to adapt to the new reality in sustainable ways. We also recognized that the need for therapy animal visits is only going to increase, which means increasing the number of registered therapy animal teams. Meeting these goals requires

innovative thinking and new approaches. Here are some of the ways that Pet Partners, our volunteers, and facilities are approaching this new landscape.

Virtual Team Evaluator Training

In order for there to be new Pet Partners teams, there need to be enough Pet Partners licensed team evaluators to evaluate them. We remain firm in our policy that team evaluations need to be done in person to best gauge a team's suitability for visiting. Our dedication to safety and being the gold standard in our field hasn't changed, and safety is even more critical as we continue to deal with the risks around COVID-19.

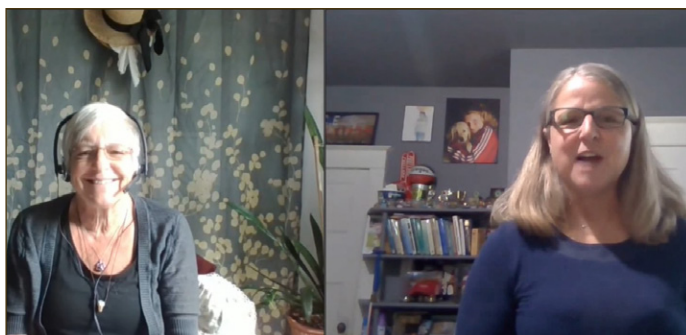
Before COVID-19, training for new team evaluators was conducted at in-person practicums held several times each year in specific locations. Evaluator candidates would sign up for a practicum location and travel there, completing their training and assessment

in a full-day, hands-on experience of group learning and collaboration. This wasn't feasible with COVID-19 risks, and many prospective evaluators indicated that they wouldn't be comfortable traveling or gathering in groups for some time to come.

In addition to the specific challenges presented by the pandemic, team evaluator training has long presented financial and logistical challenges for many candidates interested in taking on this role. Because only 12-15 practicums are offered each year, many candidates have to wait until one is held nearby, or travel to one a greater distance away. This can be a complicating factor in taking on this important volunteer leader role, and excludes some proportion of volunteers eager to serve their communities. This reduces the possibility of creating new therapy animal teams in those communities.

Nearly all team evaluator in-person practicums were canceled in 2020 due to COVID-19. But we still needed to be able to train and assess new evaluators. Pet Partners staff worked quickly but carefully to establish a fully-online team evaluator training, bypassing the need for an in-person practicum. The curriculum includes all elements of a traditional practicum, revised as needed for a virtual, distanced experience:

- Online group discussion via message boards.
- Submission and assessment of evaluation scripts.
- Phone calls with National Program Educators, Pet Partners' most senior volunteers, who facilitate and assess new team evaluators.
- Evaluation narrative review.
- Evaluation scoring practice.



Lisa Zeiner, Pet Partners Senior Evaluator/Instructor Support Specialist, works with team evaluator candidate Jeri Sawyer in a virtual practicum.

Through this fully-online version of the practicum, 28 volunteers have been newly licensed as team evaluators. While this is a notable

drop from our typical 50-plus new team evaluators per year, it's more than might otherwise have been possible. Pet Partners is proud of our ability to adjust to a new model halfway through the year, and we greatly appreciate the willingness of team evaluator candidates to try a new way and remain open to continual change.

Additionally, this innovative new model offers an option to address the challenges of distance and cost that were presented for some candidates by the in-person model. The process of adapting and innovating for what we initially thought would be a short-term problem has also helped us find ways to deal with a long-term challenge, and gives us the opportunity to expand our reach to volunteers and communities we might previously have been unable to serve.

The experience has provided evidence that the in-person practicum is still a critical educational offering that provides a depth of information and practice that is hard to replicate digitally. We're optimistic that the time will come soon when the in-person practicum will be a realistic possibility again. However, this innovative option is likely to remain a part of our team evaluator training tools to help serve interested candidates who experience barriers to in-person participation.

Outdoor Evaluations

Pet Partners policy for team evaluations has long specified that evaluations must be held in indoor spaces. The team evaluation process is designed as a simulation of a typical therapy animal visit, to gauge how a team will work together in a typical visit, and the vast majority of therapy animal visits were held indoors—until 2020. Now, as a result of the pandemic, many teams are making visits outdoors, and indoor spaces that will meet requirements for physical distancing and other pandemic-specific safety measures can be very difficult for team evaluators to secure for their evaluation events. But an in-person evaluation is still a critical part of the registration process for Pet Partners teams.



Photo: Sam Lion from Pexels

After some consideration of the issues and challenges, and a survey of our volunteer leaders to learn more about their preferences, Pet Partners made the decision to permit outdoor evaluations for 2021. The 2021 outdoor space requirements were made with significant consideration of the goals of the team evaluation process, and have been structured so that they can still provide an indoor feeling as much as possible, with requirements for hard surfaces and partially covered or enclosed spaces (such as park pavilions or fenced playgrounds). This choice allows evaluations to continue with reduced concern about the risks of COVID-19.

We've also created detailed guidance on safety protocols such as face coverings, physical contact, and hand hygiene for all volunteers taking part in evaluations (whether as evaluator, assistant, or handler, and both indoors and outdoors) to support the safest possible evaluation experience for everyone involved.

While this decision was made due to the pandemic, it's also an opportunity to assess whether this is a viable option in 2022 and beyond. Suitable evaluation space, even before the pandemic, has not always been available to team evaluators in all geographic areas. This has limited the number of new teams able to join Pet Partners, and has also caused frustration for renewing teams who may be facing a deadline to complete their registrations. We are eager to see how outdoor evaluations might relieve that burden this year, and how they might become an option beyond 2021.

Mini Workshops

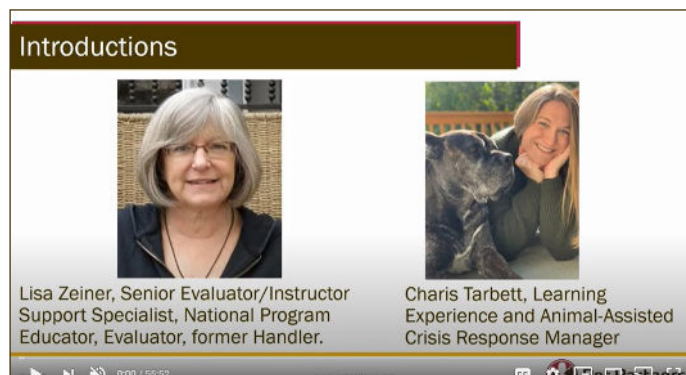
Pet Partners offers four mini workshops, which are optional and supplemental education available to both prospective and current handlers:

- Volunteering with Your Pet
- Being the Best for Your Pet: Handling Skills for All Pet Owners
- Handling Skills for Safe Visits: Preparation for Your Team Evaluation and Beyond
- The Healing Power of Animals

These mini workshops offer ways for prospective handlers and other interested people to learn more about Pet Partners, our work, and the process of becoming a therapy animal team. They're also a way for our volunteer leaders to make connections with their communities and supplement their activity as instructors and evaluators.

In the past, these workshops were always taught as in-person events because of their ability to connect people interested in the human-animal bond at the local level. That connection is still important, and we felt it was vital during pandemic restrictions for communities to still have the option to learn about Pet Partners and therapy animal volunteering. So, in March 2020, the mini workshops moved online.

Since the launch of the online option, 79 mini workshops have been offered, providing important pathways for people to stay connected not only to the volunteer leaders who facilitate these, but also to the broader Pet Partners organization and mission.



Screen shot from a mini workshop presented online by Pet Partners staff.

One volunteer leader who has eagerly adopted the virtual mini workshops is Deborah Carr with Utah Pet Partners. Prior to the pandemic, Deborah had been traveling regularly to conduct team evaluations and visit with volunteers around the state.

When shutdowns and isolation came, “All of a sudden I was stuck at home and wondering how to connect with our teams,” she says.

Utah Pet Partners had not previously used the mini workshops due to being busy with in-person events, but, Deborah says, “They popped out at me as a way to recruit new teams, answer people’s questions, and keep our current teams sharp.” After becoming familiar with Zoom as the chosen platform for her workshops, she scheduled three in May 2020, which happened with only some minor glitches and had positive response. With that experience informing her choices, Deborah asked Joanna Posey, Utah Pet Partners’ program assistant, to complete instructor training so they could work together to present the mini workshops more effectively. They scheduled monthly sessions for most of 2020.

The response to the workshops, combined with strong social media promotion, was a pleasant surprise. “Though I expected our audience would be people from Utah, I found out that people signed up from all over the U.S. and a couple of other countries,” Deborah says. “It was fun to meet other Pet Partners and people who loved animals and wanted to share them with others. I was proud of the information we had to share and the high standards and commitment to animal welfare that are part of the Pet Partners program.”

Deborah has even taken the time to create instructional videos for her volunteers on holding virtual events through video conferencing, as a supplement to the mini workshops. This is another way that online engagement helps support Pet Partners volunteers.



A screen shot from a video in which Deborah Carr provides instruction on holding a virtual visit.

Everyone hopes that in the near future the in-person events will be possible again. But the success of online versions of the mini workshops demonstrates that the education and connection they provide is valuable no matter where or how these sessions are held. The online option will continue to be a valuable resource for volunteer leaders who might lack suitable space for holding in-person events, and for communities that might not have Pet Partners volunteers in their local area yet. It’s an additional way for Pet Partners to bring our mission to new locations and encourage new volunteers.

Facilities: Meeting Challenges with New Options

The challenges of the pandemic significantly affected facilities that had therapy animal visiting programs. Most facilities stopped all in-person visiting during March 2020, as the risk of the virus became clear. But this meant that people who benefited from visits,

including staff, patients, and clients, were abruptly left without those benefits. For these facilities, developing new options to keep connections with therapy animal teams became a priority.

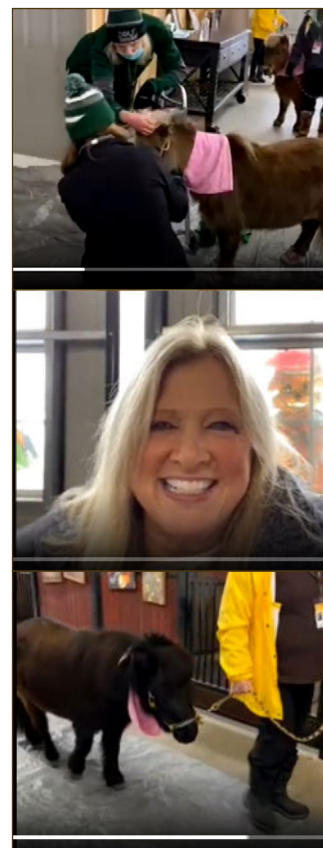
Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association (NISRA) is an organization offering meaningful recreational experiences to individuals with disabilities. Prior to the pandemic, they had received some visits from the teams of SOUL Harbour Ranch, which offers AAI with mini horses, mini donkeys, and dogs. According to Emily Todd with NISRA, “These visits included volunteers guiding one to five therapy animals to visit with our participants. The volunteers would educate our participants on animal care, as well as encourage petting, brushing, and appropriate animal handling. Their therapy dogs have also done one-on-one visits with our Adult Day Program participants to help increase communication, socialization, and independence.” But when the pandemic arrived, the therapy animal visits had to stop.

“It was a sad and scary time for our participants and staff when all in-person activities had to pause,” says Emily. “Many of our program participants had a difficult time understanding why their usual routine had been so abruptly interrupted.” Being able to bring therapy animal visits back in some form was something the facility wanted to do if possible.

SOUL Harbour Ranch worked with NISRA to make it possible. Once a month, the facility would hold a virtual visit using Zoom. Jodie Diegel, president of SOUL Harbour Ranch, would lead a virtual tour of their barn and animal residents, giving the NISRA clients the opportunity to see the animals eat, be led through their paces, and vocalize on cue. “Program participants joined the Zoom from home, which often benefited a family member or group home staff too,” says Emily. In this way, they were able to still provide animal-related engagement for clients, and include relatives and caretakers as well.

For some participants, these virtual visits even offered some distinct benefits. “Participants do not have to travel anywhere or coordinate transportation. They are able to connect and share an experience with peers in their home setting, which may be more comfortable for some,” says Emily. “Virtual visits also allow an individual with mobility challenges to explore places they may not typically be able to go.”

NISRA is hoping to resume some in-person therapy animal visits in the spring, as they want to be able to provide their clients the tactile aspects of seeing therapy animals in person. “Seeing the animals on a screen eliminates the sensory input of feeling soft donkey hair, smelling the fresh hay, or giving a horse a gentle hug,” says Emily. But she also expects that they will continue to make use of the virtual visits. “Virtual visits have opened up an opportunity for some



Images from a virtual tour of SOUL Harbour Ranch led by Jodie Diegel.

folks who have travel restraints or are not comfortable resuming in-person meetings. I certainly think virtual programming is here to stay as an additional avenue for inclusion."

Some facilities have started welcoming teams back onsite in limited ways, with strong emphasis on infection control and safety. Common elements of these visits include small numbers of teams (typically one to six maximum), designated areas for the visits, and flow management that keeps the number of people visiting with the teams at one time small, as well as face coverings and stringent hand hygiene policies.

SCL-Platte Valley Medical Center in Colorado has been allowing a few teams with Denver Pet Partners (DPP) to visit at the hospital on a limited basis, one team at a time. The DPP teams are permitted to visit with staff and visitors in the main lobby of the hospital. For safety due to COVID-19, teams are not permitted in any other areas of the hospital.

When a DPP team signs in at the front desk for their two-hour shift, an internal email is sent to all hospital staff stating that a dog is in the lobby. A special area in the lobby is set up with a chair for the handler and two hand sanitizing stations. The handler asks each visitor to sanitize their hands before and after their visit with the dog. The dog is available for staff or visitors to pet or cuddle as they have time.



Therapy dog Bear visits with a nurse at SCL-Platte Valley Medical Center.

Photo provided by Patt Bisant.

According to Patt Bisant, handler with Bear and DPP board member, "This has become a very popular program at the hospital. The presence of these DPP teams has led to increased morale and reduced stress for staff members at the hospital. Visitors to the hospital also have benefited greatly from the presence of a dog to pet."

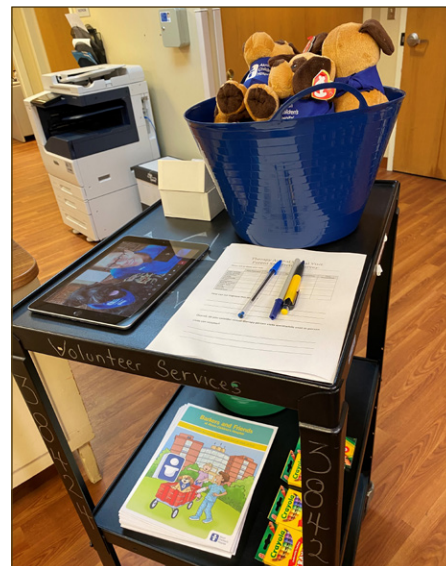
Stephanie Aldrich, Director of Volunteer Services at Platte Valley Medical Center, was eager to have the teams return as soon as the hospital determined it could be done safely. "We brought our Pet Partners back because we missed them as much as they missed us. They are a valuable part of our family here at Platte Valley Medical Center," she says. "Dogs can often sense emotions that humans cannot, and help not only our patients but our staff heal from emotional or physical things that may be going on in their lives." In a time when the severe stress of COVID-19 had a major impact on hospital staff and patients, being able to bring back the effects of the human-animal bond was crucial for the hospital. Stephanie says, "We love our Pet Partners!"

It may be a while yet until therapy animal teams are able to return to onsite facility visits in the way and frequency they did prior to the pandemic. But procedures like those used at SCL-Platte Valley Medical Center provide a model and an option to begin reintroducing in-person visits where it's feasible. This model can

help both volunteers and facilities feel more comfortable about onsite visits going forward.

Akron Children's Hospital has been working to expand their options for virtual visits and animal-related engagement since early in the pandemic, while also looking toward how they can make these opportunities an ongoing aspect of their therapy animal programming. Onsite visits from their Doggie Brigade volunteers were suspended early in the pandemic, but coordinator Whitney Romine was determined to find other options for bringing the benefits of animals to their patients.

After consulting with another hospital that had begun virtual visits, she created a plan for holding one-on-one visits between a patient and a therapy animal team through video conferencing. Volunteers sign up for a time slot to hold the video conference, and the therapy animal team is "brought" to a patient with the use of a tablet device. These visits can be supplemented by giving the patients a small plush dog and a trading card for the therapy animal at the end of the visit. In this way, according to Whitney, they're able to create connections for the patients that last beyond the duration of the specific virtual visit.



Preparation for a therapy animal team virtual visit at Akron Children's Hospital.

Photo provided by Whitney Romine.

With this support and confidence behind the program adaptations, Whitney began exploring new opportunities. These included expanding virtual visits to groups at the hospital with a "speed dating" model, where each participant gets two minutes of their own with the tablet and a therapy animal team, thereby making it possible for more patients to benefit from a virtual visit. She began working with outside organizations for virtual visits, including an equine organization and a zoo, to give patients the opportunity to see and learn about other species of animals; she mentions that a virtual visit with penguins, supplemented by small stuffed penguins, was a big hit. And she also began working on recorded visits from therapy animal teams that are available on the hospital's internal TV network. These give patients the opportunity to view the recordings any time they need to see a therapy animal.

The hospital is preparing to resume onsite visits on a limited basis, in much the same way as other facilities: one team onsite at a time, short duration, and stringent requirements for personal protective equipment and hand hygiene. But they plan to continue using the virtual visits and other types of engagement to supplement onsite visits, which will expand the impact for all patients and ensure that the human-animal bond will be readily available even if therapy animals can't be onsite.

Whitney has been impressed with the impact of these alternatives, and is enthusiastic about continuing to adapt and develop new ideas for AAI beyond the effects of COVID-19. "I've learned to try

everything," she says. "Be open to good experiences and good outcomes, and never underestimate what's possible." She recalls a virtual visit with a patient who had been depressed about not being able to see the dogs when visits stopped. He loved the opportunity to see a therapy animal team on the screen, and was thrilled to receive the dog's trading card. He waved the card excitedly at one of his nurses, exclaiming that he got to see a dog after all. That was evidence of the power these innovations can have.

Crafting Connections through Creativity

Pet Partners volunteers realized early in the pandemic that being innovative was important to continuing their volunteer work even when they couldn't visit in the traditional way. Options such as virtual visits and window visits quickly became staples for teams not able to hold onsite visits. But many volunteers wanted to help those they visit in ways that went beyond those moments, and personal creativity became the means for them to create those special connections.

For Marcia Pearce and her dog Chance, it was the opportunity to bring something of themselves to their clients even if they couldn't be there in person. Marcia made surgical caps, button headbands, and masks to drop off at the hospital where they normally visited, and she and Chance would go by the windows so staff had the opportunity to see them. "They loved being able to see Chance and they enjoyed knowing we still loved them and supported them," she says. "They said we were a wonderful stress relief through a very tough time."



Photo provided by Marcia Pearce.

Stephanie Ensley worked with her therapy dog Dirk Maus to create "flowers" and other images based on his pawprints. Then she created note cards with personalized messages and sent them to clients at the senior living facility where she and Dirk Maus normally visit. "We got a really good response to that,"

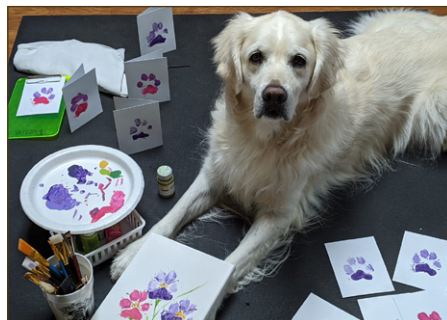


Photo provided by Stephanie Ensley.

Stephanie says, and she is planning to do more cards this spring.

Caryn Friedlander and her dog Tashi have been volunteering at a hospice facility, where activities such as virtual and window visits aren't realistic options for the patients, and not necessarily effective for family members who are limited in interactions by COVID-19.

And Caryn knew the staff was missing their visits with Tashi as well. Challenged by the pandemic to be creative in how she could serve, she came up with a letter-writing project, which evolved into a blog about Tashi's daily life, available at dogbloggery.com.

Through the blog, readers get the opportunity to learn about what Tashi is doing and see photos of him. It's something they can do on their own time and linger over if they choose, which is an advantage that virtual and window visits don't have. A variety of people read the blog, including staff at the hospice, friends, neighbors, animal lovers, kids, and parents. Caryn says, "The director of Hospice House prints the blog weekly and posts it in the staff break room. Staff enjoy and comment on it, wondering what Tashi is up to."

One of the inspirations for the blog was Caryn's five-year-old neighbor. In the early days of the project, Caryn would send the letters to her neighbor, who asked her mom to read them with her. "This reminded me of the Read With Me initiative," says Caryn. "It occurred to me that if I took what I was doing 'live' with a kid-friendly, interactive blog, it might help kids with reading and writing skills, especially for parents seeking ways to work with their kids at home."

While Caryn and Tashi miss their clients at Hospice House, this project has provided new forms of connection and a new view of their volunteering. Caryn says, "It has not only connected me in a more personal way with the staff I work with, but it has expanded my idea of how we might be of service as a therapy animal team, and in what ways." She is thinking beyond the pandemic, about how



Photo provided by Caryn Friedlander.

to support people as recovery begins from the grief and trauma from the pandemic, and about how reading and creative writing can be incorporated into traditional visits. And, she says, "I think the project may have brought me closer (if that is possible) to my dog. And I might be learning a little more about myself too, as his voice."

Take The Lead: The Pet Partners Blog

Our 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



Experience Supports Advocacy

Sharon Davis and her therapy dog Sophie have been a Pet Partners team for eight years. Sharon was inspired to get involved in therapy animal work after witnessing the effects of AAI on children with disabilities in the school district where she worked. They have visited in a variety of settings, bringing the power of the human-animal bond to people all over their north Texas community.

This work led to Sharon being contacted by the Victim Coordinator in the District Attorney's office. The DA's office was interested in having the team accompany victims when they came to meet with investigators or attorneys, as well as for pre-trial and post-testimony support. "It was clear that this new opportunity could give us the chance to support people through a difficult time in their lives," says Sharon. Sophie provides victims with a silent, non-judgmental sense of support, through their hands on her coat or a comforting glance, while Sharon uses her education as a Pet Partners handler to facilitate interactions and advocate for Sophie in an unobtrusive way. "The impact is stunning," Sharon says. "I have a story regarding every victim we have assisted!"

Sharon and Sophie were allowed to be with one victim in the witness box during testimony, and seeing the value of that support made Sharon think about how they could expand the impact of this work to



Sharon and Sophie enter a courthouse to provide victim support.

Photo provided by Sharon Davis.

others. "Because I have witnessed the power of the human-animal bond I want to share my experiences," says Sharon. "Particularly in the criminal justice system—I want this support available for any victim who needs it!"

She learned about legislation in Florida regarding therapy dogs in courtrooms, and felt this was something she could help bring to her state as well. "I realized I needed to contact my state representative and see if we could make this support available for victims in Texas," she says. She

provided information about therapy dogs in courtrooms to her state representative's office, and soon his chief of staff got in touch with her about working on legislation in Texas.

Sharon then contacted Pet Partners for additional assistance with advocacy. "Pet Partners' help with this bill is the glue that has held this together," she says, and Chief Mission Officer Mary Margaret Callahan corresponded with the representative's office many times. After a year of diligent work, HB 1071, *Relating to the presence of a qualified facility dog or qualified therapy animal in certain court proceedings*, was introduced at the start of the 2021 Texas legislative session.

For Sharon, this experience has shown how important it is not only to engage in therapy animal work, but also to advocate for the value of this work and legislation that supports it. "I have witnessed the power of the human-animal bond in criminal justice proceedings. HB 1071 will allow much-needed support for victims in Texas," she says. "The training and guidance through Pet Partners has allowed Sophie and me to be an effective team. But there is more to being effective than just being a team." Through Pet Partners' advocacy platform, and informed by their own experience, Sophie and Sharon are being effective beyond their visits.

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



AAI
Advancement

Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness through the Human-Animal Bond

One thing that's become clear over the past year is that social isolation and loneliness can have a devastating effect not only on individual health, but also on the collective sense of wellness that we share as a society. However, those of us who have pets in our lives have coped with these times in a unique way, enjoying a powerful protective agent during this extended period as expressed through the rich relationships we have with our animals.

We have long realized both anecdotally and empirically that animals can play a key role of social support in our lives^{5,8}. Various studies on the topic have revealed a theme centering on the intuitive way in which animals seem to relate to us, instinctively knowing how to support us in times of need³. Pets also provide a safe place for physical contact, affection, and emotional disclosure, ultimately engaging with humans in a way that can combat feelings of loneliness³. Results from a 2017 study on dog adoption found that those who added a canine to their home had lower measures of loneliness over time as compared to those who did not⁴.

These sentiments were validated in a national survey from Mars Petcare and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI). Results from this survey found that 85% of respondents believed that interactions with pets decrease feelings of loneliness, and 76% of the participants agreed that human-animal interactions decrease social isolation⁶.

Animals not only inspire wellness at the individual level, but they can also help us connect with the community around us and complement social connection from other human sources^{7,11}. In the same national survey referenced above, 72% of respondents indicated that human-animal interaction is good for their community, with a majority of participants reporting that their pets help them connect with other people⁶.

It's not only living with pets that decreases feelings of isolation and loneliness. Interventions involving therapy animals have been studied with these outcome

by **Taylor Chastain Griffin, PhD**
National Director, AAI Advancement

variables in mind. From college students to those in residential care facilities, animal-assisted interventions (AAI) have been associated with significant decreases in loneliness for those who interact with the animals^{1,10}.

The ways in which animals provide social contact to combat loneliness have become especially evident over the past year. As soon as social isolation became necessary, rates of pet adoption skyrocketed⁹, and the relationships that we share with animals have helped us compensate for the significant reduction in social contact that was necessary due to COVID-19². Within the world of AAI in particular, therapy animal handlers immediately went to work to share the benefits of human-animal interaction in

creative new ways, ultimately proving both the flexibility and the power of the human-animal bond.

Though there is considerable data available to help explain the impact that animals have in bolstering our sense of connectedness, we are just beginning to appreciate the complexity and depths of this form of wellness in our lives. It is a phenomenon we cannot always find words for. Its essence is captured in the feeling we experience of coming home or waking up to a beloved pet, or being greeted by a therapy animal. It is an experience that has carried us all through what has been one of the most challenging years in recent history. As we look forward to a future of increased connection with humans and animals alike, we are more motivated than ever by the ability our pets have to bring goodness and warmth into all seasons of our lives.

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Recent Research Highlight: Standards of Practice in Therapy Animal Organizations

When it comes to studying animal-assisted interventions (AAI), researchers are interested in more than just the ways in which therapy animals impact the people with whom they visit. As the field evolves, there is a growing empirical focus on the processes by which a therapy animal team earns their designation, and the procedures and guidelines that exist within the therapy animal organizations that oversee this journey.

A 2020 study¹ led by a team of five AAI experts took a deep dive into this topic, ultimately seeking to identify and compare the standards and practices that exist across therapy animal organizations in the United States. Many therapy animal organizations participated in this survey, including six prominent national organizations (with Pet Partners being one of them) as well as 24 regional organizations that were representatively dispersed around the country.

This project demonstrated that there is a wide range of discrepancy in practices across the organizations that participated in this survey. Even within the group of larger, national organizations, there were significant differences in practices that are worth noting. For example, not all national organizations require re-evaluation of therapy dogs, and some organizations do not establish a requirement for a minimum length of time that a potential volunteer must have known the animal with whom they will partner. Some of these national organizations also have breed restrictions that prevent some canines from participating in AAI.

There was even more variance in practices among the more localized groups that participated in this research. In fact, 8% of the local organizations reported not even requiring their teams to participate in an in-person therapy dog evaluation. These groups also differed in other procedural requirements such as animal health screening, vaccination requirements, handler training, and therapy animal visit time limits.

In light of this broad range of discrepancies, the researchers who led this project voiced

by **Taylor Chastain Griffin, PhD**
National Director, AAI Advancement



Photo by Alexandra Gunroe.

concern that organizations that don't adhere to the field's best standards open the door for risks related to health, safety, and welfare that could easily be prevented. If all therapy animal organizations provided training on hand hygiene and zoonotic diseases, we would likely see significant improvements in infection prevention within AAI.

The authors also noted their concern that very few of the therapy animal organizations had policies preventing therapy dogs from eating raw meat diets. Although veterinarians and infection prevention experts agree that raw diets can lead to the transmission of infectious pathogens, some organizations do not have policies in place that would prevent this possibility from occurring.

Another shocking finding from this research is that not all therapy animal organizations disallow coercive training methods. The authors also noted issues with many organizations lacking time limits on therapy

animal visits; this is a standard of practice that can go a long way in preventing a therapy animal from becoming fatigued. These considerations are among the multitude of practices that organizations can put into place to protect the welfare of the animals who engage in these activities with us.

The researchers who conducted this investigation highlighted gaps within the industry that are critical for the field to address. There was a call for future empirical investigation, encouraging research that will help validate the importance of these standards of practice. The authors of this study also addressed how critical it is that facilities that work with therapy animal teams become aware of the standards of practice associated with their teams' therapy animal organizations. This will encourage advancements within the organizations that do not currently meet the field's standards.

Pet Partners is proud to be one of the therapy animal organizations that not only champions best standards in applied practice, but also uses our position as a leader in the field to educate and advocate for the necessity of these protocols. By establishing these standards widely, we protect both the people and the animals who engage in AAI, and encourage a sense of thriving and enjoyment for all involved. Through our commitment to fund continued research in collaboration with the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, we hope to see more studies like this one, and to help to shine a light on methods by which AAI can be ethically promoted, so therapy animals can continue to inspire healing all around the world.

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Volunteer Spotlight

2020 Magic Award Recipient: Marita Delaney



Photo provided by Marita Delaney.

Pet Partners is pleased to announce the recipient of the 2020 Magic Award, Marita Delaney. The Magic Award is a scholarship established by Dr. Aubrey Fine, member of the Pet Partners Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board, to assist a Pet Partners volunteer in continuing their

professional development in animal-assisted interventions (AAI). Marita was selected based on her work with her therapy dog Francis in behavioral health services with Indigenous populations in northern New Mexico.

For Marita, introducing AAI into her work was a means of reinvigorating her commitment to her practice. "I was experiencing boredom and frustration in my work as a school psychologist, which prompted me to think more deeply of what I really wanted to do with my professional life," she says. "I was on an exceedingly long drive one morning to a remote school on the Navajo reservation and I had a distinct vision of myself with some dogs, working with children. I realized that this is what I needed to do, both for my professional fulfillment and to explore new therapeutic modalities."

Once she had determined this new direction for her work, Marita began planning the process for adding a therapy animal to her practice. She had three dogs (what are known in local slang as "rez dogs") but felt none were suited to becoming therapy animals. "Though they are wonderful dogs, each with their own gifts, they have dispositions that made them too anxious for therapeutic work," she says. "I knew I was a beginner and wanted a steady animal with just the right temperament."

She made the decision to seek out a new dog for this work, and chose a puppy with the purpose of him becoming a therapy dog. "The breeder knew what my intent was and helped make the right selection for me," she says. The puppy was named Francis,

by **Elisabeth Van Every**

after St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, reflecting the compassion and value of animal companionship that is the foundation of AAI. He proved to be the ideal partner for Marita's plans.

When Francis was ready to start work as a therapy dog, Marita approached her employer about incorporating him in her practice. "I was fortunate to work for an Indian Health Service hospital that had an administrator who was on board for therapy animal work," she says. "We rewrote the animal policy to allow the therapy animal team to be at the hospital." This openness towards incorporating AAI, with the addition of Pet Partners registration to confirm that Marita and Francis could work safely at the hospital, was crucial in enabling Marita to bring AAI to her clients.

AAI has provided Marita with new opportunities to support her clients. The process of interacting with the therapy animal offers a shift in focus that she says assists people in moving through mental and emotional barriers. "I think AAI helps get us out of our head and into our body, and helps us focus on healing on a deep and instinctual level," she says. "So many clients have psychological wounds that have led them to not trust their bodies, not trust that they will be treated well, and have created an apprehension about life. The animal-assisted interventions help break through these limitations and affirm our existence."



Two of Marita's "rez dogs" with therapy dog Francis.

Photo provided by Marita Delaney.

Marita plans to use the Magic Award to help fund additional education in AAI. She is enrolled in the certificate program in animal-assisted psychotherapy at Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado.

"I really want to build a foundation in knowledge and learn from others who are more experienced in the field," she says. Her long-term goal is to develop an independent animal-assisted psychotherapy practice, providing teaching, consultation, and direct therapy services. She also plans to incorporate additional species into her practice, since different types of animals can have different positive impacts for people.

She is particularly keen to expand to new client bases, including many populations who have long been under served. "The New Mexico region where I live is very rural and remarkably diverse in terms of economics, education, and culture. It feels to me that the time is ripe for animal-assisted psychotherapy," she says. Working with therapy animals will give her the opportunity to incorporate approaches that reflect a variety of cultural viewpoints and practices as well. "The medical model of diagnosis of pathology and office treatment has worked for many individuals but has also left many behind," she says. "Animals bring us joy and satisfaction in life, and this perception has been part of rural life for a long time. Animal-assisted therapy can bring meaningful services by doing what animals do best: connecting us and reminding us of the depth of our connection with nature."

Marita is honored to receive the Magic Award, and excited about how it will allow her to expand her practice, particularly at this extraordinary time. "The Magic Award gave me a psychological boost to move forward with this work," she says. "It has been a difficult year, and we have learned how vital are the things that we are missing in our lives: face to face time with people, animal visiting, in-person classes...This is the gift of animal-assisted work: to know our humanity better by deepening connection with nature, and to extend relating to other beings who are both similar to us and dissimilar, and exploring that divide. It is a path that I believe brings us home to ourselves."



A Volunteer Deepens Her Impact



Photo provided
by Bridgette Gottwald.

Bridgette Gottwald is a Pet Partners volunteer with her dog Sully. In 2020, she made a generous donation from her family's foundation, the 4G Foundation, to support Pet

Partners and her fellow therapy animal teams. While Bridgette is a new therapy animal handler, she and Sully have already made a tremendous impact on her community in Illinois and on Pet Partners. Bridgette shared her thoughts about being involved with Pet Partners.

How did you know you wanted to be a volunteer?

I got Sully in 2017 and the more we bonded, the more I realized that being a therapy dog would be a good fit for him. He had mastered many of the required skills even before I began training him intensely. Also, given that I am a therapist, it fits into my profession and career interests really well. He's certainly my favorite co-worker! I believe that not working with Sully as a therapy dog volunteer would be a disservice to both him and the community. I always knew there was something different about Sully; he has an unusually high level of emotional intelligence. He understands people and their needs incredibly well. In fact, I am not sure that he knows he is different from any of us!

What has been your favorite part of volunteering with Sully?

My favorite part is witnessing the joy that it brings to other people. Additionally, the training and volunteer work we have done together has further enhanced the already strong bond that Sully and I have. Taking the Pet Partners course and becoming a registered handler with Sully has taken my communication with him to the next level.

Do you have a favorite visit memory?

I always leave visits feeling fulfilled and inspired. One of my favorite visit memories took place at the Paws for Stress event that I put on with the Kellogg Student Association in October 2020. An international student who did not grow up with dogs as a part of his culture and who has been terrified of dogs his entire life attended. He decided that coming to the Paws for Stress event would be a good opportunity to grow and expand his horizons. Although timid with Sully at first, he was encouraged and slowly warmed up to Sully as they continued to

by **Brynna Counts-Morgan**

Philanthropy Manager

interact. After his experience with Sully, he said that he is more willing to engage with and trust other dogs, and that he felt encouraged by the experience to grow in a trusted environment.

Why did you decide to make a donation to Pet Partners?

Having Sully registered as a therapy dog is something that's been on my to-do list for years, and once the pandemic hit, I channeled energy towards doing things I have always wanted to do, but never got around to. Becoming involved with Pet Partners has been a great way for me to stay involved, engage in a sense of community, and give back, which has always been something really important to me. The

decision to make a donation to Pet Partners came from my passion for therapy animals, Sully and his work in particular, and making a positive impact upon the lives of others.

What is your favorite thing to think of regarding what this gift accomplished?

My biggest interest is impact. It encourages me to think about more people becoming involved in the organization, thus spreading the reach of giving back and paying it forward.

Donors like Bridgette help bring therapy animals to more people. If you would like to make a donation, visit petpartners.org/donate.

Leaving a Legacy in More than One Way: Kay Mooney

by **Mary Bohmke**

Senior Philanthropic Advisor



Photo provided by Kay Mooney

Leaving a legacy to a nonprofit typically means a financial legacy through an estate plan. However, it can also mean providing a nonprofit with a vision for a new opportunity to pursue. Kay Mooney has generously left both types of legacies to Pet Partners.

Kay was instrumental in opening a new door for Pet Partners to step through. In 2016, under Kay's leadership as VP of Workplace Well-being at Aetna, Pet Partners was invited to begin a pilot program bringing therapy animals to the workplace. What started as a pilot program led to ongoing success: an employee survey reported that 99% of employees said that their mood had improved and 99% felt they were more productive after these therapy animal team visits.

As a result of this work with Kay and Aetna, the Pet Partners Animal-Assisted Workplace Well-being program was launched, and has partnered with numerous other businesses nationwide. Kay spoke about innovative employee benefit programs at numerous conferences, and often the questions from attendees were about the benefits of bringing in registered Pet Partners teams to provide stress reduction for the workforce.

After a successful 30-year career at Aetna, Kay is now retired, but not idle. She continues to be active in numerous areas. Kay joined the Pet Partners Board of Directors in 2017, sharing her business experience and ideas to support the mission of Pet Partners. She participated in the 2020 World's Largest Pet Walk with her Tibetan terrier, Ozzy. These two make fitness a priority, often logging five miles a day on their daily walks.

Kay embraces the Pet Partners mission so fully that when it was time to update her estate plan, Kay and her husband Mark chose to include Pet Partners as beneficiaries of their estate. Her intention is to leave a legacy gift to ensure that therapy animals continue to support the well-being of communities through visits to hospitals, schools, veterans' facilities, libraries, and workplaces.

Pet Partners appreciates the time, talents, and treasure that Kay has shared with us. Not only has Kay provided a future gift to Pet Partners, but she has also opened a new avenue of opportunities for our organization. Both of these actions have created a legacy that will support Pet Partners going forward.

If you would like more information on how you can make an impact through an estate gift, visit petpartners.giftlegacy.com.



Partner
Spotlight

Pet Partners and Spectrum Brands Partner Up in Celebration of Giving Tuesday

Spectrum Brands

Pet Partners received an incredible outpouring of support from our community on Giving Tuesday, thanks to the generosity of many individual donors as well as our corporate partner Spectrum Brands. With the matched funds from our friends at

Spectrum Brands, the total raised for Pet Partners on Giving Tuesday was \$49,397! We are so grateful to all who donated and supported us during this difficult year.

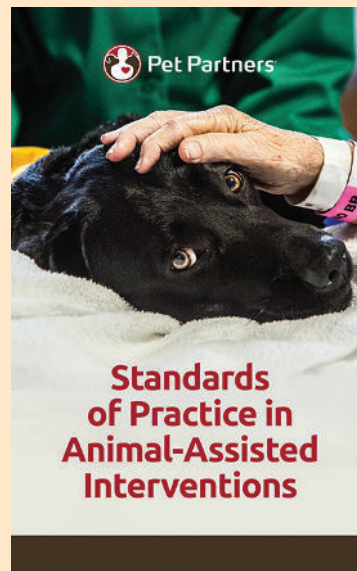
Spectrum Brands, a leading worldwide supplier of pet products for dogs, cats, birds, fish, and small animals, has supported Pet Partners since 2015, leading many successful Double Up Challenges such as our 2020 Giving Tuesday campaign.

Giving Tuesday is an important one-day giving movement in the U.S., held each year on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving.

"Giving Tuesday is one of the most important fundraising days of the year for Pet Partners," says Traci Pryor, Chief Development Officer at Pet Partners.

"We are fortunate that Spectrum Brands continues to inspire many wonderful donors to take advantage of an opportunity to double the power of their support."

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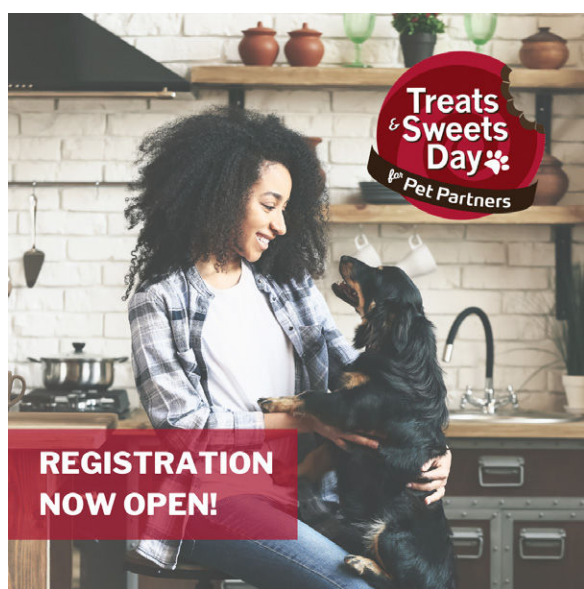




Events

Save the Date for Our Virtual and Socially Distanced 2021 Events!

While many things in 2021 are still uncertain, Pet Partners events are not! We have multiple events this year that offer virtual and safe options for participating. Please join us in celebrating and supporting the power of the human-animal bond throughout the year.



Treats & Sweets Day

Throughout April 2021

Register at petpartners.org/treatsandsweetsday



World's Largest Pet Walk

Saturday, September 25, 2021

Registration will begin in May—learn more at petpartners.org/worldslargestpetwalk

Pet Partners Virtual Conference

Coming Fall 2021

Giving Tuesday

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

 **GIVINGTUESDAY**



National Therapy Animal Day

Friday, April 30, 2021

Learn more at petpartners.org/nationaltherapyanimalday



**HONOR.
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You can also celebrate or plan your own event for Pet Partners! Check out our Create Your Own campaign at petpartners.org/createyourown.

For more information on our upcoming events, contact Ashley Drew at ashleyd@petpartners.org or 425-679-5535.



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Sprinkle Some Joy this Treats & Sweets Day!

Treats & Sweets Day is the yummiest fundraising event of the year, and it's a piece of cake to celebrate.

In honor of National Therapy Animal Day on April 30, thousands of bakers will be breaking out their mixing bowls and whipping up some treats and sweets to celebrate the human-animal bond. Participants in Treats & Sweets Day support Pet Partners in training and registering thousands of therapy animal teams who make over 3 million life-enhancing visits each year.

Whether you choose to be a baker, join a baking team, or support other bakers, you're helping to *bake* a difference for therapy animals. Visit treatsandsweetsday.org to participate!