



Pet Partners: Professionalizing Therapy Animal Visitation

The Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program meets or exceeds guidelines pertaining to safety, professionalism, and animal welfare. Pet Partners adheres to the highest standards in the field and is concerned that without such standards the future of therapy animal work could be jeopardized, limiting access to those who could benefit most. Thus, Pet Partners is the choice of risk managers and those who are educated about animal-assisted interventions.

Handler Training

- All Pet Partners handlers complete training prior to registration and have access to continuing education opportunities.
- Pet Partners offers the only handler training on infection prevention publicly endorsed by the Society of Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA).
- Pet Partners offers a canine body language course consistent with SHEA guidelines.
- Pet Partners' education emphasizes the importance of healthy handlers and animals.

Handler and Animal Assessment

- All Pet Partners handlers must pass a written assessment at the time of registration demonstrating knowledge of best practices for safe and effective visits.
- Pet Partners teams are required to pass an in-person, role-play-based evaluation every two years, more frequently than recommended guidelines, to continue visiting.

Animal Welfare

- The core tenet of Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program is “you are your animal’s best advocate,” also known as YAYABA™. This requires handlers to modify or end interactions that animals no longer enjoy, consistent with animal welfare guidelines.
- Pet Partners limits all visits to no longer than two hours, consistent with recommendations to minimize overwork and fatigue.
- To register and renew, Pet Partners teams submit animal health screening forms signed by a veterinarian to ensure the overall health of the participating animal.
- Pet Partners follows a relationship-based handler/animal support model during visits, a skill on which handlers are assessed during the evaluation process, known to Pet Partners handlers as PETS™: Presence, Eye contact, Touch, Speech.

Safety Standards

- To ensure that policies reflect current scientific information, Pet Partners relies on veterinary advisors, including those with specialization in epidemiology.
- Based on their guidance, requirements for rabies vaccination and grooming are purposefully stringent.
- Policies prohibit raw protein diets, animals with compromised health, and protection dogs.
- Pet Partners has an easily accessible system for incident reporting and a thorough resolution process to determine if a team can resume visiting. When combined with training, Pet Partners has a very low incidence of serious incidents.
- Pet Partners volunteers undergo background checks to assure facilities that a handler’s history does not preclude them from visiting with vulnerable populations.

Key Sources

As the leader in the field, Pet Partners places a high degree of importance on aligning with evidence-based guidelines published by other organizations.

- In 2015, the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) published *Animals in Healthcare Facilities: Recommendations to Minimize Potential Risks*. SHEA is a global professional society whose mission is to prevent and control healthcare-associated infections. In addition to a sweeping set of recommendations to promote safety, including required re-evaluations at least every 3 years, limited visit lengths, one animal per handler, minimum animal age, mandatory leash use, and vaccination requirements, SHEA specifically stated that healthcare facilities should be ensuring a level of formal training that is accompanied by a certificate. No such training existed until it was created by Pet Partners and endorsed by SHEA in 2016.
- The IAHAIO White Paper *Definitions for Animal Assisted Intervention and Guidelines for Wellness of Animals Involved* was published in 2014. It outlines best practices in delivering AAI to ensure the health and well-being of people and animals involved in an AAI setting. Guidelines addressed here include regular evaluations, handler training, prohibition of costumes, and preventing animal overwork, among other welfare considerations.
- The American Journal of Infection Control published *Animal-Assisted Interventions: A national survey of health and safety policies in hospitals, eldercare facilities, and therapy animal organizations in 2017*. This study investigated the AAI program policies in hospitals and eldercare facilities across the United States, as well as policies and procedures of regional and local therapy animal organizations. Their study concluded that “a lack of health care requirements among therapy animal organizations illustrates an important gap in knowledge and the potential for harm. Health care facilities must recognize this wide spectrum of policies amongst animal therapy organizations and become versed in questions for handlers before admittance to the facility.”
- The AVMA maintains *Animal-Assisted Interventions: Guidelines*, a policy standard to which members voluntarily adhere regarding their practice of veterinary medicine. It addresses the importance of routine veterinary care for therapy animals along with requirements for rabies vaccination and consideration for the impact of prescribed medications on zoonotic transmission.

Additional Information

The Pet Partners white paper *Empirical Support for Therapy Animal Interventions* outlines the research related to therapy animals in a variety of settings and contexts:

- Medical Settings
- Physical Wellness
- Mental Wellness
- Education
- Older Adults

Visit petpartners.org/learn/benefits-human-animal-bond/ to download the paper.