



# Position Statement on Animal Health and Welfare

## Pet Partners' Position on Therapy Animal Health and Welfare

Pet Partners is the nation's leading nonprofit registering handlers of multiple species as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions, which includes animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE). Our position on therapy animal health and welfare during animal-assisted interventions is centered on the concept of the handler being an animal's best advocate. Being an animal's advocate requires making decisions based on the preference of the animal, rather than the best interests of a client, researcher, professional, or healthcare team member. This means being attuned to not only the animal's needs for bathroom breaks, food, and water, but also to the animal's unique body language cues. The ability to successfully interpret what an animal is communicating is an uncompromising safety feature in responsible therapy animal visiting practice.

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

- Pre-visit preparation: Allow the animal to relieve himself/herself before the visit, in an area away from the entrance of the facility. Be sure to pick up waste and dispose of it properly.
- Water: Beware of not letting the animal overheat. Provide water periodically.
- Safety first: Never assume that an individual knows how to touch the animal appropriately. For the welfare and comfort of the animal during the visit, the handler will need to instruct or show adults or children how to pet the animal appropriately.
- Visit lengths: Begin with very short visits, and gradually increase the length. However, for safety and liability reasons, a team should visit a maximum of 2 hours per day.
- Timeouts: Remember that it is preferable to leave after a short time, even 5 minutes, if the animal is becoming stressed. A short, enjoyable visit is better than a prolonged visit that makes the animal uncomfortable.

- **Stress breaks:** During all parts of a visit, watch for the animal's unique body language cues, and pay attention to its level of comfort. The demands of visiting might lead the animal to need more frequent breaks. Therapy animals should be given the opportunity to relieve themselves a minimum of once per hour.
- **Other animals:** If other animals will be present, keep at a safe distance. If the animals are allowed to greet one another, the initial meeting is best done outside the facility. This includes resident animals.

## Considerations for Therapy Animal Programs

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

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

## Considerations for Researchers

Pet Partners fully supports and encourages the practice of conducting empirical research on the effects and outcomes of animal-assisted interventions. While many intuitively understand the benefits of positive interactions with animals in our lives, an emerging body of research is recognizing the impact that the human-animal bond can have on mental health and wellness.

Researchers interested in studying the effects of animal-assisted therapy or activities should plan to utilize registered handler teams from credible organizations in order to ensure maximal welfare for the therapy animal. This allows researchers to place the responsibility of maintaining the animal's welfare in the hands of an educated, registered handler with the proper knowledge and expertise appropriate for monitoring the therapy animal while maintaining the utmost credibility and standards in the field. If you are interested in

working with the Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program for research purposes, please contact us for more information.

## Considerations for Facilities

Private or publicly owned facilities ranging from hospitals, nursing homes, veterans' centers, hospice, Alzheimer's facilities, courtrooms, and schools have begun to utilize a resident therapy animal in place of visiting therapy animal handler teams.

Facilities interested in incorporating a resident animal into their organization need to determine their specific program goals, target audience or client group, and visitation schedules and settings before pursuing the recruitment of therapy animals to ensure that the right type of animal is chosen. The animal should be screened for suitability as a therapy animal prior to placement. Most importantly, the animal must have a designated handler/owner who is not only intimately familiar with the animal's unique behavioral signals, but also acts as the animal's primary advocate during both the workday as well as after-hours.

It is strongly recommended that a facility interested in acquiring a resident therapy animal should form a multidisciplinary committee to discuss safety, infection control, and any other policies that are relevant to the therapy animal's presence. Within this committee, representative(s) knowledgeable in animal welfare (e.g., a veterinarian) need to create and maintain policies and procedures to ensure safe practice and proper treatment of the animal.

## Considerations for Licensed Professional Health and Human Service Providers

Many clients can benefit from the inclusion of an animal into a goal oriented and structured therapeutic intervention. Animals have long proven to aid in a patient's recovery by reducing stress, decreasing blood pressure, and creating a positive atmosphere for the client.

Those interested in incorporating animal-assisted therapy as part of a professional application often partner with highly qualified handler teams such as with Pet Partners, but can also choose to recruit their own animal for AAT. In choosing an animal, it is important to keep in mind not every animal is well suited for therapy work or has been evaluated properly to ensure safe, effective visits for the client. Another consideration lies in who will maintain advocacy for the animal; if the professional's focus is maintained on the client throughout the session, who will manage the therapy animal's need for breaks, stimulation, and overall state of welfare? Without an advocate for the animal, it is possible that the animal's welfare could be unintentionally or intentionally compromised for the client's needs.

We strongly recommend that professionals consider utilizing a handler team for therapeutic interventions. Utilizing a handler team allows professionals to have someone who can attend to the animal's needs as they arise. It is the handler's responsibility to thoughtfully prevent situations that contribute to negative interactions between the client and animal, allowing the professional's focus to remain on the client.

Any professional planning on utilizing a Pet Partners handler team should begin by reviewing the Pet Partners policies and procedures that all volunteers abide by. Based on the unique needs of the facility, a professional will likely need to establish additional guidelines and procedures for the visiting animal program.

## Considerations for Commercial Enterprises

Several commercial enterprises have begun to utilize animals in their facilities, either temporarily or permanently, promoting the concept of including animals for creating a positive and fun environment for clients and/or for financial gain. When animals are used in a commercial setting to attract customers or visitors, this is not an example of animal-assisted activities, therapy or education. Pet Partners does not support or encourage unsupervised and loosely controlled human-animal interactions that have the potential to contribute to a negative state of welfare for both parties involved. Pet Partners strongly maintains that in order for the welfare of the animal to be maximized at all costs, there must be an individual who is assigned the sole responsibility of acting as the animal's advocate, ensuring wellbeing, responding to body language cues, and supporting the animal in the event of a stressful situation. It is crucial that this individual is able to consistently and reliably recognize the animal's unique body language, which is often difficult with an animal the handler is not intimately familiar with. This is why Pet Partners requires someone to either own or work with an animal for at least six months before being eligible to register as a team.

In the event that a commercial enterprise chooses to incorporate animals into a public setting, Pet Partners suggests that a specific policy be in place to ensure that an animal is not only willing and able to interact with customers, but that the animal feels safe, is relaxed, and can be closely monitored during interactions by a knowledgeable individual. In addition to monitoring the animal's state, this individual should also aim to ensure safe contact with the animal and the customers by communicating proper species-specific touching, handling, and interaction. Implementing further responsibilities, such as making sure an animal has an ability to take a break or monitoring the number of people that are interacting with one animal at a time, are suggested.

## Considerations for Adoption Events

Considerations for commercial enterprises do not extend in the same way to adoption events where professionals are adopting out animals to give them a forever home. However, when an adoption event happens in conjunction with a commercial enterprise, it is paramount that these animals have an advocate present. These programs should keep in mind that juvenile animals are a vulnerable, fragile population and that early stressful experiences can create future behavioral challenges. Oftentimes, only one individual monitors a litter of animals, creating a situation where it is difficult to maintain the welfare of all individual animals.

Those working with juvenile dogs and cats should consider the following before proposing interactions:

- **Animal Health:** Animals that are less than 12 weeks old don't have fully developed immune systems. Prolonged stress can lead to immune system crash and subsequent illness.
- **Animal Travel:** Puppies and kittens are prone to soiling or possibly vomiting in their carriers. This tendency not only makes the animal unhappy and unsuitable for the day's visit but also might condition the animal to become anxious when traveling.
- **Visitation Safety:** Puppies and kittens often play "bite and scratch." Because they aren't fully reliable, predictable and controllable, their behavior can put clients at risk and lead to liability for the facility or animal.

Public events are an important way to raise awareness of animals needing homes. Pet Partners advocates that these events should be staffed by knowledgeable individuals who are able to monitor the welfare of participating animals as well as guide safe and positive interactions with clients.

## About This Document

Pet Partners holds a variety of positions on therapy animal health and welfare that are not only important to our message and organization, but are also important to researchers, professionals, facilities, and the general public. This position statement has been approved by Pet Partners' Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board and Board of Directors.