



Position Statement on Shelter Animals as Therapy Animals

Adopted animals from shelters can make great therapy animals. Most homeless animals are adolescents or adults and reputable organizations will perform a behavior assessment before making an animal available for adoption. A mature animal's inherent temperament is fully formed and relatively stable. Additionally, most animal shelters spend time getting to know their animals so that they can make good matches to ensure a forever home.

Potential is very important when looking for your next therapy animal at the shelter. Inquire about animals who are calm, confident, tolerant, and highly people oriented with no history of aggression. If possible, ask to observe potential adoptees in different situations.

When meeting your potential therapy animal look for:

- The animal who comes forward and eagerly greets you
- The animal who doesn't mind having his feet, ears, and mouth touched
- The animal who would rather interact with people than pay attention to other animals
- The animal who does not react negatively when it hears a noise or if it does startle, recovers quickly

While being an adult and having a behavior assessment are helpful in identifying future therapy animals, a trusting bond between animal and handler is critical. Building this bond takes time. For this reason, Pet Partners does require a minimum of six months (one year for birds) living with a new pet before registering as a therapy animal team. Keep in mind it may take more time than this for an adopted animal to form a trusting bond with you depending on their history.

Many shelter animals may not have all (or any) of the skills required to pass the Pet Partners team evaluation, but obedience training not only can build these skills, but your trusting relationship as well.

Training should have outcomes for both the animal and the pet owner. In addition to focusing on the animal developing reliable basic obedience skills in a variety of environments, the handler should be



learning to predict their animal responses to stimuli, read their animal's body language and adjust situations accordingly.

Don't pass by the animals who are a little different. Shelter pets with disabilities or special needs carry a double incentive to participate if they meet the criteria above. They are less likely to be adopted and, if registered, may offer extra inspiration and relatability to potential human clients they visit. Therapy animals do not need to look perfect to have an impact.

Adopters who are prospective handlers should be committed to providing the animal a home for its entire life even if you discover within that adjustment period or after your first team evaluation, that your new pet is not as appropriate for therapy animal work as you had hoped.

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.