

POSITION STATEMENT

On Public Access for Therapy Animals



Pet Partners®
Touching Lives, Improving Health

About This Document

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

Pet Partners' Position on Public Access for Therapy Animals

The Americans with Disabilities Act allows those with disabilities to be accompanied by a working assistance animal (guide, hearing and service dogs and sometimes mini-horses) in public places such as grocery stores, restaurants, and airplanes. While several institutions such as hospitals, schools, or clinical practices allow and encourage the presence of therapy animals, the handlers or owners of the therapy animals are not granted the same rights to public access as assistance dogs.

Therapy animals are both fundamentally and legally different from emotional support or assistance animals. While therapy animals are evaluated and registered for working with the public through a therapy animal organization, it is important to note that this does not give them any public access rights. Pet Partners takes seriously a reported infraction of a registered therapy animal being "passed off" as an assistance animal, or the use of Pet Partners identification, like a vest or badge, to suggest the animal is anything other than a therapy animal. Therapy animal handlers, by always acting with integrity, can be public educators regarding the difference between an assistance animal and a therapy animal.

Pet Partners' Position on Therapy Animal Health and Welfare

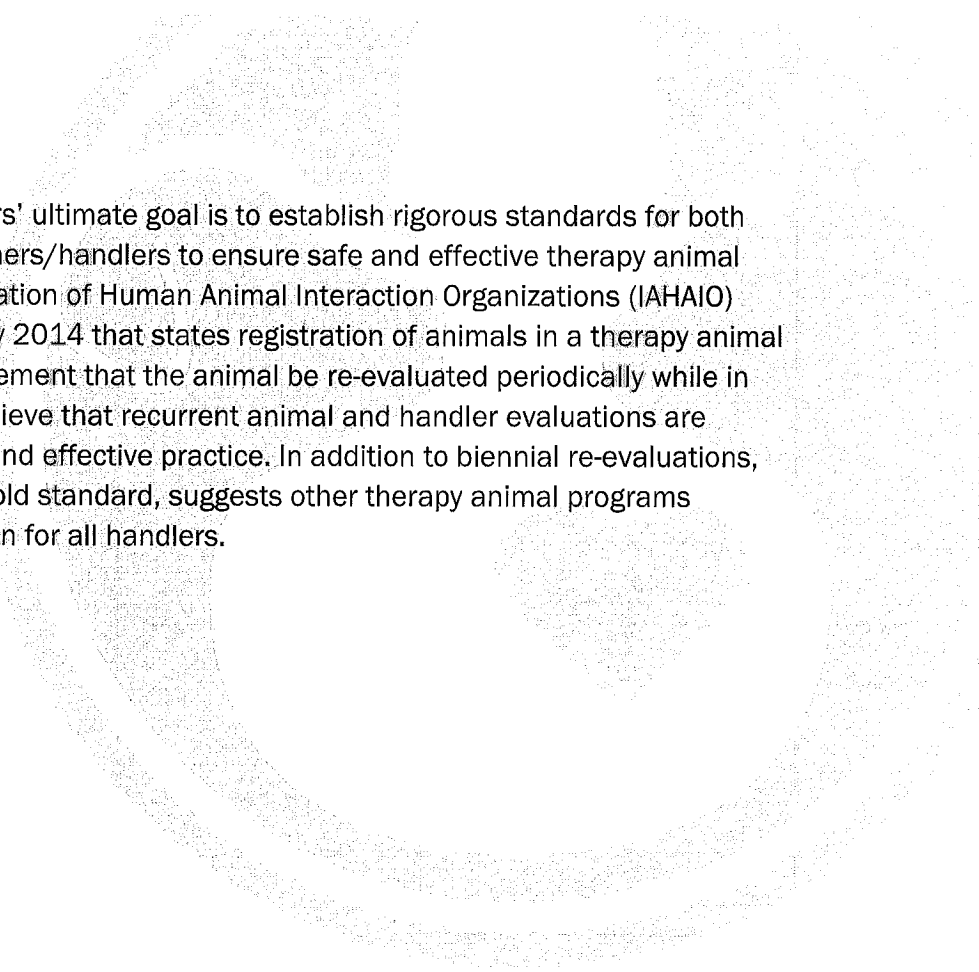
Pet Partners is the nation's leading nonprofit registering handlers of multiple species as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions, which includes animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE). Our position on therapy animal health 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 him/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.

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. The following position statements have been approved by Pet Partners' Human Animal Bond Advisory Board and Board of Directors.

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.

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.

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. The following position statements have been approved by Pet Partners' Human Animal Bond Advisory Board and Board of Directors.