

Starting a Facility "Pet Therapy" Program: How to do it Safely and Effectively

Definitions

Commonly called 'pet therapy,' animal visitation can be Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) for general visitation by a therapy animal or Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) where animals and their handlers work with human/health service provider as an adjunct to traditional therapies.

Introduction

Animal visitation programs have become very popular in recent years. It's easy to see why – animals provide comfort, unconditional acceptance, and social interactions with populations in diverse settings. Elder care facilities, psychiatric populations, hospitals, and schools have all been the welcome recipients of AAA and AAT. A high level of benefit is afforded by each type of interaction. In addition, effective visitation is provided by a handler acting as a volunteer, thereby giving individuals an opportunity to engage with various populations in a meaningful and unique way.

An animal visitation program was first initiated at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in 1998 as a casual visitation organization. Over the years, a more formal and organized approach allowed the group to develop a higher level of safety and a more effective program. Tufts Paws for People is now a Community Partner of a national organization, Pet Partners® (previously Delta Society), which best fit the goals of developing a safe, effective, and rigorous program. Some of the considerations that were important for this decision were the following:

- Liability insurance is provided to all registered teams that follow policies.
- Multiple species and animals with disabilities are allowed to be visitation animals.
- A training program is required for owners/handlers.
- Registration requires passing a rigorous test of skills and aptitude of the animal/handler team.

- Regular re-evaluation of the team is required.
- There are rigorous health and grooming requirements.
- Animals eating raw meat diets are not allowed to participate.

An important consideration for facilities considering having their own visitation program is how to do so as safely and effectively as possible. There are any number of programs that provide handlers and animals to provide visits or even just individuals with animals who volunteer to visit with their pet as part of no organized group. At this time, there are no set rules or regulations about how such programs are set up. Facilities should remember that having animals come onto their site has some inherent risk. A primary goal should be to limit the risk as much as is possible.

Getting Started- Some Initial Questions to Consider

1. *What is the general goal of having a program at your facility?*

Is it to provide a novel and pleasant diversion, or to provide adjunct therapy to an existing service? AAA programs are more spontaneous in content, with no specific goals for each visit. Visits can be provided individually or in a group setting. AAT programs require a request from a health/human service provider with specific goals designed for each visit. Visits are usually set up one on one and both the visit and the results must be documented (think of an animal team working with a physical therapist, for example).
2. *Is everyone at your facility comfortable with having animals visit?*

It is important to have uniform acceptance of a visitation program. Common concerns from staff range from potential extra time from staff to help out with the visits, to staff that are fearful around animals and wish to not be in a position to have to

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interact, to allergen production and infectious control considerations. An initial set-up meeting can help to address any concerns that staff may have. Therapy animals can also provide a great benefit to staff, so scheduling some time for staff members to visit with the therapy animals can be very positive.

3. *What species would you like to have come to visit?* The majority of visitation animals are dogs, but some groups include other animals. Pet Partners®, for example, also evaluates and registers other species, such as cats, certain pocket pets (such as guinea pigs and rabbits), miniature and full size horses, and llamas.

Finding a Program to Work With

While individuals and their animals can be invited/allowed to visit, we recommend you consider working with a group where animal/handler teams meet these important criteria:

- Do they carry liability insurance?
- Do they follow careful grooming protocols? Animals can carry dirt and potential pathogens if not carefully groomed. Dander can contribute to allergies for susceptible individuals. Thoroughly bathing and grooming an animal within 24 hours of visitation can help to reduce these risks.
- Do the handlers undergo training and testing as well as the animals? This is important to ensure that the handler is reliable, has good communication skills, and recognizes stress in his or her animal.
- Are animals at least 1 year old? Young animals are more unpredictable and more easily stressed by visitation.
- Have animals been tested for basic skills to ensure they are controllable, predictable, and reliable?
- Have animals been tested for aptitude for visitation?

- Will animals be kept on leash at all times? This is important for safe visitation (and being off leash can invalidate many liability insurance policies).
- Is each handler visiting with only a single animal at a time? It is difficult for a handler to carefully monitor his or her animal if visiting with more than one. This may increase risks to the people being visited and can increase stress in the animals.
- Has the animal been determined to be free of parasites? A negative fecal exam every 6-12 months is recommended to reduce risk of transmission of parasites.
- Has the animal had appropriate vaccinations? Rabies vaccination is a minimum in dogs, but vaccinations for other infectious diseases may also be appropriate.
- Are visitation animals prohibited from feeding raw meat diets and treats? These diets and treats are often contaminated with bacteria, such as Salmonella, that can be transmitted to people.
- Are animal-handler teams registered with an organization, such as Pet Partners?
- If teams have undergone testing, are they also re-evaluated on a regular basis? Some animals, especially as they get older, may no longer enjoy visitation or may have medical conditions that make it less comfortable for them.

Additional Considerations

- Keep paperwork on file for each team, which includes vaccination records (rabies, at a minimum); registration with an organization (eg, Pet Partners), and proof of liability insurance.
- Consider if the population at your facility requires additional training for volunteers or screening (for example, CORI checks in child populations).
- Have a place where volunteers will sign in/out to provide proof that they were present on a specific day and time.

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- Decide in advance who will receive the therapy animal visits and who will not.
- Decide if a staff person will accompany the team during each interaction or if the handler will be provided a list of people who would like a visit on that day.
- Consider where visitors should park and if there is a fee to park. City sites present a unique set of potential issues from the parking/transporting animal from vehicle to site, especially in extreme weather.
- Designate a place where an animal can relieve itself and ensure a nearby receptacle for any solid waste.
- Consider the facility set up – is the animal/handler team potentially going to have difficulty getting through the lobby to their expected visit location? An alternative entrance may work better (as well as less distracting to those in the main lobby).
- Consider if the animal will be expected to go up multiple flights of stairs. This can be difficult with older or arthritic dogs, especially large breeds.
- Consider what kind of flooring is present – some dogs have difficulty with shiny flooring and may be reluctant to walk down a long and shiny hallway.
- Be aware of conditions in your facility that may be especially chaotic and noisy (think of loud TV sets, children going through hallways, lots of beeping machines, no carpet to absorb sounds, etc.) – this may prove very distracting to some animals and inhibit their ability to engage with the targeted population.