

Information on Stress-Relief Therapy Animal Events

What is Tufts Paws for People and Pet Partners®?

Tufts Paws for People is a Community Partner of the national Pet Partners® program. We chose this program for several reasons: they allow species other than dogs, the testing of the “team” is rigorous (handler and animal companion together form a team), retesting of teams is required every 2 years, they have excellent health and safety standards, and they are the only national organization that requires handler training.

When and why should schools use therapy animal programs to relieve stress for students?

There are many benefits that come with animal visitation for students and staff. Times such as finals week, the semester-end crunch, and standardized testing periods can be very stressful for students, teachers, and staff. Studies have shown that interacting with animals reduces blood pressure, lowers anxiety, and reduces self-reported depression.

What issues should be considered before handler/animal teams visit your school?

- Be sure you work with a program or animal/handler teams that meet at least minimum requirements for training, safety, health, and grooming, and that carry liability insurance (see below for specific criteria to consider).
- Consider how long you want the event to last. We recommend that events last no longer than 2 hours. This provides maximum opportunities to participate without overwhelming the facility, staff, or teams. However, for large events, scheduling teams for 1-hour shifts may be preferable as these events can be tiring events for the animals.

- We recommend having at least one team per ten students at a time; the number of teams visiting your school should be determined by the expected number of students, number of event volunteers, and available space.
- Driving directions, parking accommodations for the teams, and rest break areas for the animals should be established in advance of the event.

Where should the event be held?

- It is important to be aware of areas that may be especially chaotic and noisy (dining halls, gyms, places with loud television sets or with no carpet to absorb sounds, etc.). Loud environments can be distracting to some animals and inhibit their ability to engage with visitors. Ideal locations are carpeted, conference rooms, quiet study rooms, and libraries.
- Consider what type of flooring is present. Some animals have difficulty with slippery flooring and are reluctant to climb multiple flights of stairs. The facility set-up is also an important consideration. Will the animal/handler team have difficulty getting to the visit location? Alternative entrances should be an option.
- Events that expect large crowds should have multiple small rooms or a very large room so that there is enough space between teams (12-foot radius at minimum) to reduce distractions and encourage contact between students and the animals.

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What makes a good therapy animal program?

We recommend you consider working with a group where animal/handler teams meet these important criteria:

- **Teams carry liability insurance**
- **Teams 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.
- **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.
- **Animals are at least 1 year old**
Young animals can be unpredictable and more easily stressed by visitation.
- **Animals have been tested for basic skills to ensure they are controllable, predictable, and reliable**
- **Animals have been tested for aptitude to ensure they can accept social interaction in a pleasant, forgiving, or welcoming manner**
- **Animals will always be kept on a leash**
This is important for safe visitation (and being off leash can invalidate many liability insurance policies).
- **Each handler visits with only a single animal at a time**

It is difficult for a handler to carefully monitor and adequately support their animal if visiting with more than one animal at a time. This may increase risks to the people being visited and can increase stress for the animals.

- **Animals are prohibited from being fed raw meat diets and treats**
These diets and treats are often contaminated with bacteria, such as Salmonella, that can be transmitted to people.

How do I mitigate the risks involved with animal visitation?

- An important consideration for colleges/universities is how to conduct these stress-relief events as safely and effectively as possible. Remember, having animals come to your school has some inherent risk, so considering the various issues listed here is important. Best practices indicate that the university risk assessment team be consulted prior to scheduling an event to ensure support from all involved.
- College stress-relief events are usually heavily photographed or videotaped. To protect student information, it is important to refrain from taking photos or videos of the event without written permission per your institution's policies.
- Handlers should be made aware of the contact information of the local college counseling/student services office. These services should be made available to students who seem to need extra help and used to notify college staff if handlers become aware of students in need (suicidal thoughts, abuse, etc.).