

Therapy animals enhance human health and well-being

Therapy animals can positively impact our physical, social, and emotional lives. Whether helping to encourage struggling readers, motivating someone to participate in their treatment protocol, or providing comfort in the final days of life, therapy animals are increasingly recognized for their value. Leaders in animal-assisted interventions (AAI) must be committed to preserving and expanding access to therapy animals through high standards for safety and professionalism. Therapy animal visitation is not about novelty or entertainment.



Training for the handler, not just the animal

- While well-behaved animals that are reliable in a variety of situations are critical, handlers need a working knowledge of relevant best practices, from infection prevention and HIPAA regulations to working with the needs of specific populations.
- Handlers with the ability to accurately interpret animal body language and proactively manage interactions keep everyone safe.
- To stay current as the field evolves, handlers should have access to continuing education.

Thorough and recurring assessment

- Recurring, individual, in-person evaluations ensure that therapy animals remain suitable as animals age.
- In addition to demonstrating a core knowledge base, handlers and their animal partners must demonstrate teamwork as well as practical skills and continually work to keep those skills strong.

Animal welfare prioritized

- Recognizing that animals are asked to participate, their welfare is prioritized; they should enjoy, not simply tolerate, therapy work.
- Guidelines such as minimum animal age and maximum visit length prevent overwork.
- Animals should have regular veterinary care.
- Therapy animal training and guidance by handlers should be positive and force free.

Protect against illness and injury to clients

- To limit the risk of zoonotic transmission, comprehensive infection prevention protocols must exist and include hand hygiene, animal grooming standards, rabies vaccination and other health requirements.
- Protocols should also prohibit raw protein diets to limit the risk of zoonotic transmission.
- Handlers should be educated not to visit when they have a health condition that could be contagious to others.
- Procedures must exist for reviewing and addressing incidents and provide consistent resolutions in support of client safety and animal welfare.

Key Sources

As the leader in the field, Pet Partners places a high degree of importance on aligning with evidence-based guidelines published by other organizations.

- In 2015, the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) published *Animals in Healthcare Facilities: Recommendations to Minimize Potential Risks*. SHEA is a global professional society whose mission is to prevent and control healthcare-associated infections. In addition to a sweeping set of recommendations to promote safety, including required re-evaluations at least every 3 years, limited visit lengths, one animal per handler, minimum animal age, mandatory leash use, and vaccination requirements, SHEA specifically stated that healthcare facilities should be ensuring a level of formal training that is accompanied by a certificate. No such training existed until it was created by Pet Partners and endorsed by SHEA in 2016.
- The IAHAIO White Paper Definitions for *Animal Assisted Intervention and Guidelines for Wellness of Animals Involved* was published in 2014. It outlines best practices in delivering AAI to ensure the health and well-being of people and animals involved in an AAI setting. Guidelines addressed here include regular evaluations, handler training, prohibition of costumes, and preventing animal overwork, among other welfare considerations.
- The American Journal of Infection Control published *Animal-Assisted Interventions: A national survey of health and safety policies in hospitals, eldercare facilities, and therapy animal organizations* in 2017. This study investigated the AAI program policies in hospitals and eldercare facilities across the United States, as well as policies and procedures of regional and local therapy animal organizations. Their study concluded that “a lack of health care requirements among therapy animal organizations illustrates an important gap in knowledge and the potential for harm. Health care facilities must recognize this wide spectrum of policies amongst animal therapy organizations and become versed in questions for handlers before admittance to the facility.”
- The AVMA maintains *Animal-Assisted Interventions: Guidelines*, a policy standard to which members voluntarily adhere regarding their practice of veterinary medicine. It addresses the importance of routine veterinary care for therapy animals along with requirements for rabies vaccination and consideration for the impact of prescribed medications on zoonotic transmission.



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