



Guidance for Handlers and Facilities Using Therapy Dogs

Chapter 574 of the laws of 2019 called upon the Commissioner of New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to develop guidance for handlers and facilities using therapy dogs. Utilizing information from the [New York State Therapy Dog Working Group](#), the following principles should assist handlers and institutions using such dogs.

Criteria for Dogs Used as Therapy Dogs

Dogs used as therapy dogs must have an appropriate temperament and possess basic obedience skills. Therapy dogs must be licensed as required by Article 7 of New York State Agriculture and Markets Law. Dogs should also be registered with a therapy dog organization whose standards are consistent with these guidelines.

Dogs registered with a recognized therapy dog organization should be issued some type of identification, tag, or accessory that indicates that they are a therapy dog. The organization should also maintain the following health standards for the dogs:

- Animals are not fed a raw protein diet or raw treats (e.g., freeze-dried liver treats or rawhides, bully sticks, etc.). Raw protein diets lead to increased infectious agent transmission between animals and humans.
- Animals receive a health screening on an annual basis by their veterinarian, which provides a professional opinion that the animal is up to the work of being a therapy animal. A copy of full physical examination by veterinarian, vaccination history (including rabies vaccination), and negative fecal parasite testing must be kept on file.
- Animals are thoroughly groomed, including nails, teeth, eyes, and ears, within 24 hours of visiting. Bathing should be conducted at intervals appropriate to assure cleanliness while protecting the integrity and health of their skin.
- Animals are not currently taking antibiotics, immunosuppressive drugs, or antifungal medications, and have no stitches or staples present.
- Animal skin should be intact without evidence of superficial infections.
- Intact female animals are not “in season” or nursing young.
- Animals are not currently showing any effects of illness, including vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, acting listless, etc.
- Other animals in the household are not showing evidence of upper respiratory or gastrointestinal illness.



Handlers that Register Dogs as Therapy Dogs

A therapy animal organization should ensure that handlers are appropriately trained.

All handlers must:

1. Have training specific to animal-assisted intervention on topics including, but not limited to:

Handler Responsibilities

- Ensuring a humane experience for the animal
- Ensuring that the animal is not made to experience undue stress and is not at risk of physical or emotional injury
- Ensuring appropriate interactions between the client interactions and the animal

Best Practices for Handling

- Using techniques for responsive stress management to support the animal
- Proactive positioning of the animal relative to the client, considering special equipment such as IV lines and wheelchair wheels
- Selection of appropriate environments and/or clients for the therapy animal team, giving due consideration to the animal's experience and comfort level, the activity level of the environment, and the additional oversight or support that is available from onsite staff

Professional Conduct

- Enforcing any applicable confidentiality requirements, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)
- Seeing appropriate behavior and boundaries with clients
- Respecting the attitudes of others, particularly those who are concerned about the presence of an animal
- Respecting therapy animals, acknowledging that they can express preferences for involvement and can actively consent to participation

Zoonotic Transmission and Infection Prevention

- Identifying signs/symptoms in the handler or animal that preclude interactions
- Identifying risks to the handler and animal that preclude an interaction, such as posted precautions
- Following best practices in hand hygiene
- Following species-specific grooming guidelines to minimize zoonotic transmission

Best Practices When Working with Clients

- Facilitating interactions with clients



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- Approaching strategies that ensure client consent
- Using closure strategies that balance the desires of the animal and the client
- Using conversational best practices, such as active listening, person-first language, and strategies for establishing rapport

Handler Self-Care

- Using stress management techniques
- Identifying compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout
- Having access to continuing education, including formal coursework and/or mentoring/shadowing
- Undergoing assessment on factual and applied knowledge that is related to best practices in handling and safety
- Undergoing a practical assessment of skills and aptitude to demonstrate the team's ability to interact with clients safely and effectively
 - The practical assessment should reoccur at least every three years.
 - The location of the practical assessment should attempt to simulate a setting for future interactions. Care should be taken to avoid settings that the animal is overly familiar with, such as a dog training center or the handler's home.
 - To ensure consistency, evaluators who conduct the team's practical assessment should complete relevant, species-specific training in animal behavior, in addition to training that is specific to the registering organization. Evaluators should also be familiar with the settings where therapy animals work. Additionally, care should be taken to ensure an impartial evaluator and avoid familiarity between the team and the evaluator. The therapy animal should not be habituated to the evaluator.

Therapy Animal Organizations

Risk management is an important component. The organization should:

1. Provide an appropriate level of insurance coverage for the animal-assisted intervention activities of the handler/animal team.
2. Have a comprehensive system for identifying, tracking, and resolving incidents and perceived incidents. Incidents include but are not limited to acts of aggression by the animal, inappropriate behavior by the handler, and injuries to any participating party, including the handler and animal.
3. Have policies in place that minimize the risk of infection. These should include:
 - Vaccination/titer requirements to veterinary standards appropriate to the species.
 - Prohibition against raw-meat diets, which are more likely to contain potentially disease-causing bacteria, including *Salmonella*, *E. coli*,



Listeria, Clostridium and Campylobacter.

- Required hand hygiene for clients and handlers.
 - Handler health requirements including being free of symptoms of communicable illness.
 - Requirements that therapy animals be in good health, receiving a veterinary examination at least once a year to proactively identify and treat health concerns.
 - Barrier use when a therapy animal sits on a client's lap, on top of a client's bedding or on furniture at a facility. These barriers can be either disposable or laundered, but they should not be shared by multiple clients.
4. Take reasonable steps to help ensure that handlers are well matched to the clients/populations they are serving.

Animal welfare should always be incorporated steps include:

1. Interactions are time-limited. Therapy animals experience fatigue. Animals that are routinely fatigued have suboptimal immune responses and are at risk for illness as a result of their therapy work. Although different interactions result in different levels of fatigue, a limit of one to two hours of work is recommended. Note, however, that the ideal time might be even shorter, depending on the individual animal or setting. For practitioners who incorporate their therapy animal for only parts of a day, the animal should be provided a rest area away from people.
2. Training is positive, and the equipment that is used is non-coercive. Training of any kind should use force-free techniques. Equipment that is used for training and handling should be equally force-free, and the use of slip, spray, shock, or prong collars (or similar equipment that is not perceived as humane) should be precluded.
3. The animal must never be left unattended by its handler. Handlers who leave their animal unattended put the animal's welfare at risk.

Facilities Using Therapy Dogs

The following best practices should be adhered to:

- Therapy dog services should only be provided to clients who affirm that they wish to receive such services.
- No client should be required to participate in therapy dog activities. Clients with allergies, fear of animals, or difficulties cooperating may not be appropriate clients to participate in the program.
- Facilities should only utilize services provided by therapy dog organizations (or individuals) that meet the best practices contained within this report.
- Facilities should prioritize infection prevention and disease control to ensure the safety of both clients and staff. Facilities should set standards for cleanliness that



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account for the needs of the clients served. Facilities should devise protocols to ensure that the designated area meets those standards before and after each visit. In addition, facilities should request that participants wash their hands both before and after each visit.

- Facilities should designate a liaison for the program who will become knowledgeable of the policy and procedures of the therapy dog program. The liaison will be responsible for the coordination of services between the facility and therapy dog organization.
- Facilities should require that a staff member remain present during therapy dog activities as a means of further ensuring safety for all participants.
- Facilities should maintain records of the session, including documentation of any problems that may have arisen during a specific session.
- Facilities should solicit feedback from clients regarding their experiences with the program and the therapy dog organization utilized.