

Model Legislation: Recommendations for Identifying Qualified Therapy Animal Teams

PURPOSE

This bill provides guidance to assist state public facility officials in identifying and approving qualified therapy animals and their handlers - or therapy animal teams - for interaction with members of the public.

DEFINITIONS

- **Therapy Animal:** An animal that successfully completes a program operated by an organization that registers or certifies a therapy animal and the animal's handler as meeting or exceeding the standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions. Therapy animal does not include a service animal or emotional support animal unless that animal has also completed therapy animal credentials.
- **Therapy Animal Handler (or "Handler"):** The individual volunteer or paid professional responsible for the animal during interactions with members of the public, who has received training meeting or exceeding the standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions.
- **Therapy Animal Team (or "Team"):** A unique combination of one handler and one animal who work together, and who register to provide animal-assisted interventions (AAI).
- **Animal-Assisted Interventions (or "AAI"):** An intervention that intentionally incorporates therapy animals for the purpose of promoting improvement in an individual's physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning.
- **Standards of Practice in Animal-Assisted Interventions (or "Standards"):** The minimum qualifications for therapy animals and handlers based on peer reviewed, empirical evidence. Available publicly at www.therapyanimalstandards.org.

BILL LANGUAGE

Therapy animals provide an important public service in our communities and decades of science and research have proven the benefits and effectiveness of interactions with therapy animals. In our public schools, therapy animals can

foster reading abilities including fluency and comprehension, as well as provide a source of motivation and focus in learning. In state healthcare facilities, interactions with therapy animals have been correlated with decreased perceptions of pain and improved recovery rates, not to mention decreased anxiety and stress for both patients as well as their families and caregivers. In state courtrooms, therapy animals can provide emotional support for witnesses testifying in difficult trials. People from all walks of life can benefit from therapy animals from veterans, to the elderly, to those impacted by crisis events or natural disasters.

Oftentimes, officials responsible for approving access to public facilities for therapy animals are unfamiliar with appropriate qualifications or guidelines to properly assess the therapy animal and its handler (or the “therapy animal team”). To support these officials the State is providing guidance outlining minimum standards for participating handlers, animals, and therapy animal programs.

These standards are articulated in the *Standards of Practice in Animal-Assisted Interventions* (<https://therapyanimalstandards.org>). The Standards include five sections addressing criteria for handlers, therapy animals, assessment, animal welfare and risk management. Additionally, there are two sections with recommendations for facilities seeking to incorporate therapy animals and for researchers pursuing AAI topics.

To create consistency across state definitions and therapy animal programs, the State recommends that all state public facilities hosting therapy animals adopt the Standards when reviewing and approving therapy animal teams or creating therapy animal programming.

These Standards are not mandatory, but merely provide a reasonable set of criteria for therapy animals and their handlers to help ensure the health, welfare, and safety of all involved.