Therapy Dogs at a Glance

What is a therapy dog?

- Therapy dogs help people through animal assisted activities (AAA) or animal assisted therapy (AAT)\(^1\)
- AAA are informal programs such as visiting children at a library.
- AAT involves a health or human services professional\(^1\). Examples include reducing pain in children\(^2\) and relieving combat stress in soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan\(^3\).
- Therapy dogs are not service animals as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act

Dog/Handler Teams:

A therapy dog and its handler are often referred to as teams.

Registries

Registries provide training and evaluation services, support, and liability insurance for dog/handler teams that they register. Examples include:

- Pet Partners®
- Therapy Dogs International®
- Therapy Dogs, Inc.®

Requirements to become a therapy dog/handler team

- Generally, registries require dogs and handlers to pass exams conducted by trained evaluators
- Some registries require dogs to complete obedience training while others don’t require formal training
- Some registries require handlers to complete in-person or online courses
- Some registries require a number of supervised volunteer activities before registering a team
- Dogs must have documented good health, such as vaccination records and veterinary exams

Exams

- Conducted by trained evaluators affiliated with a particular registry
- Test basic skills like “sit” and “stay”
- Confirm tolerance for crowding, clumsy petting and loud yelling\(^4\)
- Simulate AAA and AAT settings, like visiting a patient or interacting with children \(^5\)

Groups or Chapters

Therapy dog/handler teams sometimes form groups affiliated with a registry. These groups bring together multiple dog/handler teams in the same location and provide additional support. Local examples include:

- Delta Hearts of Gold
- Heart of Texas Therapy Dogs

\(^1\)Pet Partners Website http://www.petpartners.org/PPTherapyAnimalProgram
\(^3\)Beck, et al., 2012