

Therapy Animals in Social Work

There is an increased interest in using animals in mental health practices. Have you ever considered using a therapy animal in your practice? Perhaps you already have a pet in your office that people can interact with during their session.

The goal of this article is to answer basic questions and raise certain concerns that should be resolved before making the decision to use a pet in your practice. Let's start with some basic information.

What is a therapy animal team? A therapy animal team consists of a well-behaved pet, together with their owner, who has the time, willingness and energy to volunteer, to help other people's lives.

The legal status of a therapy animal is a pet. A therapy animal can be a dog, cat, bird, rabbit, horse and potentially a few other species.

Legal Concerns one should consider are: Therapy Animals do not have public access rights, as Service Dogs do. The handler, when working through a Therapy Animal Program, such as www.therapyanimals.org or www.deltasociety.org and having been educated by that organization, passed an exam with their pet partner, and having joined the organization can then become a Registered Team. Part of the fees paid to the organization provides the Handler with liability insurance in the event that the handler and/or pet cause any damage.

Are Therapy Animals Certified or Registered? The following quote is from the Intermountain Therapy Animals' manual: "Please note that ITA Volunteer teams are registered, not certified. Certification would imply that some outside certifying agency had verified a team's eligibility to participate.

In contrast, registration implies screening. Intermountain Therapy Animals does not certify that a team has been trained to a certain level; rather, the team is registered after having met certain minimum requirements as determined by the ITA Team Volunteer Screening Tests."

Reputable Organizations: If you really want to use your pet as a therapy animal, I would highly recommend getting involved with a reputable organization. For those of us in Montana the organization that's the most active is Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), www.therapyanimals.org. ITA is based out of Salt Lake City, and they cover the Rocky Mountain front. Another large therapy animal organization is the Delta Society Pet Partners Program. For more info visit www.deltasociety.org/page.aspx?pid=259.

Caveat: When you belong to a therapy animal team note that you are only covered when acting as a volunteer with that organization. You cannot be a registered team and then use your pet in your practice, unless there happens to be a written agreement between you and the therapy animal organization.

If you are planning on using your pet as a therapy animal in your own practice, you will not be covered by liability insurance unless you purchase it on your own or are able to add your dog to an already existing policy.

If you choose to "go it on your own" I highly recommend contacting your insurance agent and making certain that you will be covered in the event that something might happen between your animal and a client or other person. There is proof of the value of the human-animal bond, but things can happen quickly that might risk your business and/or standing in your profession. Above all, make sure you understand the risks. When you do, then you can truly reap the rewards of having your pet at work with you as therapy animal.

Alicia Smith speaks on *Animals in Mental Health Recovery* and is available to speak to your group. For more information visit www.recoveryanimals.com and/or www.aliciasmith.com Alicia can be reached at 406-994-9134 or via email at alicia@aliciasmith.com.

OPPORTUNITY: Are you recommending animals to any of your clients? Why or why not? Alicia is looking for a small group of mental health professionals that are willing to meet for 2 phone sessions to discuss the indications and contra-indications when recommending an animal as a supplemental therapy. These calls will cover Emotional Support Animals, Therapy Animals and Service Animals. If

you have an interest in this topic and would like to sign up or learn more please contact alicia@aliciasmith.com.