



# What Makes a Person and Animal Suitable to be an MSTD Volunteer Therapy Team

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**IMPORTANT:** Please note that your dog **must be at least 12 months** to qualify for the pre-screening. Animals will be pre-screened on an individual basis with regards to age as well as suitability. (Cats must be at least one year old; pocket pets like guinea pigs must be at least six months old). If you have rescued/adopted your animal, **you must have lived with it for a minimum of six months** before you may test to be an MSTD Volunteer Therapy Team.

We look for very specific qualities in the people and their companion animals who will qualify as MSTD volunteer therapy teams. Animal owners who are considering this kind of service should read the following with great care and consideration because, while this manner of volunteering can be extremely valuable and rewarding, it is not enjoyable or appropriate for every person or every animal.

## What Qualities Does a Person Have to Demonstrate to Be Part of a Successful Team?

Providing animal-assisted therapy is a *human health and social service*. It is not a sport or competition, and being a therapy dog is not a title to accrue. As such, your role in the process is extremely important. It is not a simple, casual or stress-free kind of volunteering; many liken it to a para-profession, and you will often be “alone” (meaning, no group of MSTD colleagues together, all doing similar things) with patients. You will need to be brave, steady, direct, confident, emotionally mature, and flexible, among other qualities.

- We look for people who demonstrate good social skills, who can smile and relax and relate comfortably with their animal companion and with other people. And, you need to be at least 12 years old.

- We look for things that will be pertinent when you do AAA/AAT visits—such as, are you on time? Did you prepare carefully by reading the material you received? Did you come to the test properly prepared? Are you willing to ask questions when you don’t understand something? Do you listen well? Follow instructions?

- We also observe your relationship with your animal—how well do you know this animal, its personality and its needs? How does the animal feel about you—does it respond to your commands? How do you make corrections (tone, style, etc.)?

You need to consider your willingness, ability and comfort level relating to the following:

- Do you truly enjoy making conversation with strangers, extending yourself in often difficult moments?

- Will you be comfortable saying no when a therapist or patient/client asks you to do something that you know will not be safe or comfortable for your animal?

- Will you be comfortable with the often unpleasant situations surrounding various therapies—such as strong bodily odors, people in pain, people demonstrating angry or unpredictable behaviors?

- Will you be willing to invest your time to learn about the various patient populations you will be working with, such as adults with Alzheimer’s, children with autism, people dealing with mental illnesses or profound physical damage?

- Do your life circumstances permit you to be committed to this volunteering? It cannot be slap-dash, occasional, or casual, because patients will be depending on you and your animal.

## What Kinds of Animals Will Qualify?

Besides dogs and cats, there are a great many other species that make wonderful visiting animals and can form strong human-animal bonds. To name just a few: birds, rabbits, goats, domestic rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, ducks and chickens, miniature donkeys, llamas, cows and horses. At this time, Mid South Therapy Dogs & Friends specializes in animals that are easily “portable” for taking into healthcare institutions. **Animals such as snakes, ferrets, lizards and wild or exotic animals are not accepted.** This is because

wild or exotic animals are not legally acceptable as pets in many states, and without more research documenting their predictability over time, we cannot accurately evaluate their behavior and reaction to stress. Finally, ***we do not accept as therapy animals dogs who have had any training in bite work (for sport or protection)***. Please ask us for more information if this is an issue that affects you and your dog.

## What Makes an Animal Appropriate?

Animals should have excellent training so that they are reliable and under control even in crowded situations and when there are loud noises. For dogs, a basic obedience class is a must. Potential therapy animals must be calm, well-behaved and have excellent manners. It is also important that animals who participate in AAA/AAT are people-oriented and enjoy visiting so that they will be happy volunteering with you. Read the following checklist carefully for details about what makes an animal appropriate for AAA/AAT:

- Animal demonstrates behavior that is reliable, controllable, predictable, and INSPIRES CONFIDENCE in the person s/he is interacting with
- Animal actively solicits interactions with people and is accepting and forgiving of differences in people's reactions and behavior
- Animal demonstrates relaxed body posture, moments of sustained eye contact (dependent upon species and breed), and relaxed facial expressions
- Animal is more people-oriented than animal-oriented
- Animal enjoys being petted, touched and hugged
- Animal is able to remain calm with people doing such things as speaking loudly, moving clumsily and clapping
- When approached from the rear, the animal may show curiosity, but does not startle, growl, jump up, bark, eliminate, act shy or resentful
- The animal can walk on various surfaces reasonably comfortably, including carpet, concrete or asphalt, tile, linoleum, rubber matting and wooden floors
- Animal is outgoing, friendly and confident in new settings

## What Kinds of Animals Definitely Will *NOT* Qualify?

- Any animal that is too energetic and rambunctious, or aggressive to people or other animals, will not pass the tests. Growling, snapping, lunging, extended barking, raising of hackles, or baring of teeth will disqualify a dog. Sometimes we meet owners who tell us, when their dog starts to growl, that "he's just talking," or "that's just his way to say hello." Even if that's true, it doesn't work to have an animal in school and hospital settings, with people who are sick and perhaps frightened or even tentative about meeting a dog, to have to recoil in fear. Again, any dog trained in bite work, whether for sport or protection, is not eligible to be tested.
- If your animal is in poor health it would not be safe for it or the people s/he meets to be exposed. We visit in situations where clients are medically very fragile, and therapy animals must be picture-perfect in both health and grooming. Animals who are dusty, greasy or stinky do not appeal to clients.
- If your animal is unpredictable (sweet one moment, aggressive the next) or doesn't like being around people (shy, backs away, gets nervous, quivers, etc.) it would not be suitable.
- We do not accept any dogs who are wolf hybrids, even though many may be wonderful companions, again because they can be unpredictable.
- It is very important for your dog to live like a member of your family. Dogs who spend most of their lives outdoors, especially if they sleep outside and/or are kept chained most of the time, do not make good therapy animals. Dogs who are calm, well behaved, well socialized members of their pack are most successful as therapy dogs.