

## Excelsa Health Pet Therapy Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: What is the difference between a therapy animal, a service animal and an emotional support animal?**

**A: Therapy animals** are trained and tested to provide affection and comfort to a variety of people in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, retirement homes, schools, libraries, court houses and other environments including those where something traumatic or disastrous has occurred. They are brought to these locations by their owners. Typically, the owners volunteer their time, but when not volunteering, the animals are their family pets.

**Service animals** are highly trained to help specific individuals with physical or mental disabilities perform specific tasks in their daily lives that they cannot perform for themselves. They are often trained by others for the person with the impairment. Once tested and certified, service animals live with the individuals they assist.

**Emotional support animals** provide their owners with the therapeutic benefits that the human-animal bond offers as part of the owners' psychological treatment. They are prescribed by a licensed mental health professional. They do not require specific training or testing.

Only service dogs are covered by the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) Act to accompany their owners anywhere and receive certain rights in no-animals-allowed locations.

**Q: What animals are used for pet therapy at Excelsa Health?**

**A:** Most of the 40+ animals are dogs. However, Excelsa has had one cat in the program in the past and currently has one cat in the program.

**Q: Do the animals need to be registered/certified before applying at Excela Health?**

A: Yes, they need to be tested and registered/certified through one of the recognized therapy animal organizations. The four organizations that are/have been represented by animals in Excela's program are:

- [Alliance of Therapy Dogs](#) (formerly Therapy Dogs, Inc.)
- [Pet Partners](#) (formerly Delta Society)
- [Therapy Dogs International](#)
- [Therapy Dogs United](#)

Pet Partners is the only one of the four listed that register animals other than dogs. For a more inclusive list, see the American Kennel Club's ["AKC Recognized Therapy Dog Organizations."](#)

**Q: What types of dogs are included in the Excela Health pet therapy program?**

A: Currently, the dogs range in size from a 4-lb. Yorkshire terrier ("Yorkie") to a 100-lb. Old English sheepdog. The dogs are a mix of purebred dogs and mixed-breed dogs. There are no breed restrictions as long as a dog has passed a test and is currently registered through one of the recognized therapy animal organizations. (See question above.)

**Q: What other requirements must the animals applying to the pet therapy program at Excela Health meet?**

A: Initially, owners must complete applications for each dog or cat they want to use for pet therapy at Excela. They must answer basic information about the pet as well as selected health information. The application must be signed by a licensed veterinarian. The application also requires the owner to identify the therapy animal organization through which the animal is registered. In addition, the owners complete a brief (10-question Y/N) behavioral survey for each animal.

Annually, volunteers must submit proof of a renewed registration with one of the recognized therapy animal organizations. They must submit proof of an examination of each pet by a licensed veterinarian within the most recent 12 months. This includes a negative fecal exam within the past 12 months. If a particular pet is not taking heartworm medication routinely (monthly), volunteers must submit proof of a negative fecal exam once every six months. They must also submit proof of a current rabies vaccination.

**Q: Are there any dietary restrictions on an animal for an owner to apply to Excela Health's pet therapy program?**

A: Excela follows the recommendation of the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology (SHEA). It excludes any animal fed "any raw or dehydrated foods, chews or treats of animal origin" within the last 90 days. This recommendation was published in the journal, *Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology*, in the May 2015 issue.

**Q: What must the owner do to become a pet therapy team volunteer at Excela Health?**

A: After completing a Volunteer Services application, each human volunteer must meet the same requirements as any Excela volunteer. These include bloodwork, at the health system's expense, for a Quantiferon Gold test for tuberculosis as well as a titer check for chicken pox, measles, mumps and rubella. They must provide proof of various clearances:

- [Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance](#) (free online submission)
- [Pennsylvania State Police Criminal Record Check](#) (free online submission)
- [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\) Criminal Background Check](#) (\$21.35; waived if the applicant has continuously lived in PA for the past 10 years.)

They must also complete select documentation and mandatory education--all of which is managed through Volunteer Services.

**Q: Once the Volunteer Services application process is completed, how are pet therapy teams assigned at Excelsa Health?**

**A:** Based on the volunteer's preference, the coordinator for pet therapy assigns teams to specific facilities and specific locations within that facility based on the existing need. The volunteer determines the day of the week, including evenings and weekends, and the frequency of visits.

**Q: Which facilities do Excelsa Health's pet therapy teams visit?**

**A:** Excelsa's pet therapy teams can visit any of the three hospitals in the health system:

- Excelsa Health Frick Hospital (Mt. Pleasant, PA)
- Excelsa Health Latrobe Hospital (Latrobe, PA)
- Excelsa Health Westmoreland Hospital (Greensburg, PA)

In addition, teams currently visit Excelsa's two outpatient centers:

- Excelsa Square at Norwin (located off Route 30 in the Irwin/North Huntingdon area)
- Excelsa Square at Latrobe (located off Route 30 in the Latrobe/Unity Township area)

**Q: What areas can pet therapy teams visit at Excelsa Health?**

**A:** Pet therapy teams visit a variety of patients---medical, surgical, behavioral health and rehabilitation patients---on nursing units and in waiting areas throughout the facilities. They do not routinely visit critical care areas and are not permitted to visit patients who are in isolation precautions. Each volunteer asks permission before entering a room or before approaching someone in waiting areas or other areas of the facilities.

Pet therapy teams are available for others as well. They interact with family members and other visitors during their rounds. Staff--both on the nursing units and in other departments--also enjoy visiting with the animals.

Visits to specific patients are scheduled as requested by a patient, by a family member or friend, or by a staff member familiar with the patient's needs. Pet therapy volunteers also have opportunities to participate in special events to which the Excelsa Health therapy teams have been invited. Some events are held within the health systems while others are at various locations throughout the community.

**Q: Do Excelsa Health's pet therapy teams round on their own?**

**A:** Initially, the coordinator for pet therapy rounds with each team for a minimum of two visits. She continues to round with the team until the volunteer is comfortable with his/her assigned location. She is available at any time to answer questions or address concerns and will periodically round with teams as requested or as needed.

**Q: How are pet therapy teams identified at Excelsa Health when rounding?**

**A:** The volunteer wears the same identification as any Excelsa volunteer—a logoed jacket or polo shirt and/or an I.D badge. In addition, each dog is given a picture I.D. badge to wear as well, much to the delight of those who encounter them.

**Q: What are the benefits of pet therapy?**

**A:** Research has shown that pet therapy provides various health benefits to the patients and others the animals encounter. Among those benefits are temporarily:

- easing stress and anxiety
- offering comfort and company
- elevating mood
- lowering blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate
- reducing the perception of pain

- reducing boredom and providing a distraction from illness

In addition, the owners also engage with patients, providing them with an opportunity to talk about their own pets, family pets and other topics of interest.

Having the chance to pet an animal also helps family members and visitors take their minds off their troubles—feelings everyone experiences when a loved one is hospitalized. In waiting areas, it often encourages conversations among visitors. Seniors who may not have as many visitors or no longer have the ability to care for a pet themselves seem to especially enjoy the animals. They often reminiscing about the pets they have had over the years. Most children just naturally gravitate to these furry friends, who provide creature comfort in an unfamiliar environment.

**Q: What are the benefits of Excela Health’s pet therapy program for the teams?**

**A: Pet therapy volunteers** receive a number of benefits. Free parking is provided for all volunteers. Pet therapy volunteers can also enjoy any recognition afforded all volunteers. In addition, the coordinator for pet therapy organizes a variety of special acknowledgments for pet therapy volunteers only such as holiday and special day appreciations and an annual luncheon. Most importantly, volunteers are rewarded at every visit with the positive reactions they get from those they encounter.

Most rewarding for the **dogs** is the extra attention they get during their rounds. In addition, each month one of the animals is featured with a poster and a write-up as part of the health system's "Therapy Dog of the Month" program. A word search from that write-up is made available in waiting areas throughout the facilities to help pass the time for patients and visitors.

**Q: What characteristics are advantageous to owners who want their dogs to become pet therapy dogs?**

A: Most therapy animal organizations require that a dog be at least one-year-old before they can be tested. In addition to basic commands, such as sit, stay and down, testing includes elements specific to the environments in which therapy dogs will be working. For example, a dog should not be frightened by sudden, loud or strange noises, by someone moving quickly, or by people with canes, walkers or wheelchairs. They must be good with children. They must know the “leave it” command so that if a patient drops food or medication on the floor, they will not pick it up. Regardless of the breed—purebred or mixed—the #1 priority on the list, of course, is a sweet temperament—one that is comfortable with strangers and enjoys frequent petting.

**Q: Who do I contact if I am interested in becoming a pet therapy team at Excelsa Health?**

A: Contact Volunteer Services at 724-537-1357.

**Q: Can I make a donation to Excelsa Health’s pet therapy program?**

A: Yes, you can donate to Excelsa’s pet therapy program through the Latrobe Area Hospital Charitable Foundation, where the account for the system-wide program exists. In addition, you can also contribute online at:

<https://www.excelahealth.org/excela-health-foundations/latrobe-area-hospital-charitable-foundation>.

Simply click on “Donate Now” and designate the pet therapy program.