

# VOLUNTEERING WITH YOUR DOG AS A THERAPY DOG TEAM



## Thank you for your interest in volunteering with Ottawa Therapy Dogs!

Ottawa Therapy Dogs (OTD) is the largest volunteer based registered charity in the National Capital Region that provides canine assisted therapy. Founded in 2000, our handlers volunteer with their own dogs and we visit a variety of health care, educational and social services facilities. Our emphasis is on training people, along with their suitable dog, to become a visiting team to provide canine assisted interactions. We then provide ongoing mentoring and education, liability insurance and many opportunities to volunteer.



### Important notes before you begin!



- Your dog must be between the ages of 2 - 10 years to be evaluated.
- If re-homed or adopted, the dog must have lived with you for at least 1 year.
- OTD does not accept service, assistance or emotional support dogs to become therapy animals. We are committed to the well-being of both animals and people, and we feel that it is asking too much of any dog to subject them to the stress and emotional pressure of more than one of these huge and challenging jobs.
- Upon successful completion of OTD's evaluation, orientation and mentoring process your dog will not have public access rights as a service dog would. Ottawa Therapy Dogs only wear their bandanas while visiting our approved facilities with the handler that was evaluated with the dog.
- It is not possible for OTD to accommodate professionals wishing to use their dogs in the course of regular work as they are not acting in a volunteer capacity. If this is of interest to you, please contact us at [info@ottawatherapydogs.ca](mailto:info@ottawatherapydogs.ca) or 613-261-6834 for further guidance.
- We are only recruiting volunteers who have at least one or two days of weekday availability.
- Raw food diets are not permitted. If your dog is on a raw diet, you would need to transition to a cooked or dry kibble diet.

There are several steps to go through in order to become a therapy dog team. **Reading this document completely is the first step!** It will explain the requirements and process to qualify for this unique, and very rewarding volunteer opportunity.



## **Introduction**

As you can imagine, the world of canine assisted interventions can be very rewarding for both you and your dog, but getting there requires some time and effort. It is important that you understand the preparation required and the risks and responsibilities associated with this type of volunteer work. We look for very specific qualities in handlers and their dogs who will qualify to be an OTD therapy dog team. Dog owners who are considering this type of volunteer work should read the following carefully because while this type of volunteering can be extremely valuable and rewarding, it is not enjoyable or appropriate for every person or animal.

If you are wondering about what you can do to prepare yourself & your dog, the best groundwork is socialization to a wide variety of environments, people and animals, combined with solid obedience work. While it is not mandatory, we highly recommend completion of Puppy Kindergarten, Beginner's Obedience & Advanced Level 1 (or equivalent) and/or the Canine Good Neighbour course.

Once your dog is at least 2 years of age and you have completed some obedience training together, you should begin to get a good sense of whether they are very stable in temperament and that they have what is called "human affiliation". This is critical to assessing if your dog is suitable for therapy dog work. To gain a good understanding of what we mean by this, please thoroughly read these 3 articles:

- [Lending a Helping Paw](#)
- [Born or Made?](#)
- [Some Things to Consider About the Human Expectations Placed on Therapy Dogs](#)



## Is Your Dog a Good Candidate?

Your dog gets a vote! As humans, we are ethically obligated to ensure the well-being of our animals. We do not USE our dogs as therapy dogs, but rather we work WITH our dogs as a team.

A therapy dog must be enthusiastic about meeting a constant stream of new people so they will be happy volunteering with you. This temperament is actually quite rare, but it is essential, and it is inborn, not trainable. Dogs with the right temperament then should have excellent training so that they are calm, well-mannered and responsive, even in crowded situations and when there are loud or unusual noises.

As indicated above, therapy dogs need to have what is referred to as “human affiliation”. This means that they must:

- Be **more people-oriented** than animal-oriented
- **Actively solicit interactions with people** and is accepting and forgiving of differences in how people react/behave
- Be outgoing and friendly and confident in new situations
- Enjoy being petted, touched & hugged by anyone, not just familiar people
- Demonstrate relaxed body posture, moments of sustained eye contact and relaxed facial expressions
- Show that they are consenting to the interactions and are enjoying it!

Your dog also must:

- Demonstrate **behaviour that is reliable, cooperative, controllable, predictable**, and that **inspires confidence** in the person with whom they are interacting.
- Have **solid obedience skills** so they are reliable and under control in ALL situations and in ALL environments.

- Be able to remain calm with people speaking loudly, moving clumsily or making sudden movements.
- Should be comfortable walking on various surfaces (carpet, concrete, tile, rubber matting) and be familiar with things such as elevators, automatic doors, different types of stairs, etc.
- Be willing and comfortable to receive regular grooming - nails (trimmed and buffed), ears, teeth, bathing, hair trims etc. We visit institutions where clients are medically very fragile, and therapy animals must be picture-perfect in both health and grooming. Animals who are dusty, greasy, slobbery or stinky do not appeal to clients!
- Be in excellent health. Current rabies vaccination is required.



## **What Kind Of Dog Will Not Qualify?**

- Any dog that is too energetic, rambunctious or aggressive to people or other dogs
- Growling, snapping, lunging, extended barking, raising of hackles or baring of teeth will disqualify a dog.
- Dogs that make a lot of vocalizations, whether they be aggressive in nature or not. Some owners will say that “he’s just talking,” or “that’s just his way of saying hello.” Even if that’s true, it’s inappropriate behaviour that can cause undue stress and fear in people who are sick and tentative (or even frightened) about meeting a dog in a health care or school environment
- If your dog is in poor health, it is unsafe for your dog to be part of a therapy dog program. We visit institutions 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 dog is unpredictable (sweet one moment, aggressive the next) or doesn’t like being around people (shy, backs away, gets nervous, quivers, etc.) they would not be suitable.



## **What Qualities Does a PERSON Demonstrate as Part of a Team?**

The “north end of the leash” is a critical component of therapy dog work! Your role is very important! You must be at least 18 years of age to be a therapy dog handler.

- Providing animal-assisted interactions (AAI) 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.
- It is not a simple, casual or stress-free kind of volunteering - you will need to be brave, steady, direct, confident, emotionally mature, and flexible, among other qualities.
- We are looking for people who demonstrate good social skills, who can smile and relax and relate comfortably with their animal companion and with other people.
- We will observe your relationship with your animal—how well do you know your dog, their personality and needs? How does your dog feel about you—do they respond to your commands? How do you make corrections (tone, style, etc.)? How well do you read your dog’s stress signals?
- Most importantly, you will need to have a strong, solid and positive relationship with your dog, and be willing to treat him/her as a partner, not a tool or piece of equipment.

**Please consider your willingness, ability and comfort level related to the following:**

- Do you truly enjoy making conversation with strangers, extending yourself in often difficult moments?
- Are you an exceptional listener? Most people rate their own listening skills as average at best. Animal-assisted therapy handlers need to be GREAT listeners, able to empathize and support people who are going through the toughest moments of their lives.
- 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 dog?
- Will you be comfortable with the often unpleasant situations surrounding various therapies—such as strong bodily odours, people in pain, people demonstrating angry or unpredictable behaviours?



- 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 dog. **You need to commit to a regular visiting schedule of weekly or bi-weekly visits.**
- Between grooming your dog in preparation for visits and the actual visit, you will need to invest 4-6 hours every 2 weeks at a minimum.
- A Police Record Check - Level 3 - Working with the Vulnerable Sector - will be required after you complete our Evaluation. (We provide you with a letter of volunteerism to submit with your application so there will be no cost to you.)



## **Costs Associated with Becoming a Therapy Dog Team**

**Evaluation of you and your dog - \$40**

**Registration and Annual Membership - \$45**

**Costs associated with travel to your placement** - Cost varies but parking will always be covered by the facility that you are visiting. We will always strive to find a placement with a driving distance that is reasonable for you.

**Veterinary Fees** - These are the responsibility of the volunteer. Outside of standard vet care and vaccinations, there is the addition of an annual negative fecal test result that is necessary to remain registered with OTD. Costs for this test vary from clinic to clinic but seem to range between \$65-\$100.



## **What Happens During the OTD Evaluation?**

The Evaluation is a TEAM assessment, not just a test of the dog's obedience or a performance title. There is actually more weight placed on how you, as a handler, deal with various situations you are likely to encounter during visits. You should be consistently supportive and encouraging to your dog, and demonstrate a strong, bonded relationship, while interacting with anyone you meet during the session, whether it be the evaluators or the "patients", and being conscious of the environment around you. There will be various items and equipment and new people and situations you may encounter during visits. Hopefully, both you and your dog will be comfortable and relaxed! **TREATS CANNOT BE USED DURING THE EVALUATION**

**In addition to all the items listed on the Test Requirements document and shown in the Evaluation Demonstration Video, we place significant importance upon looking for these things:**

- Is your dog giving consent to all interactions? Are they enjoying the attention? Do they willingly accept people approaching them and/or do they happily initiate interactions?
- Your relationship with your dog: Does your dog look to you for guidance? Trust that you will always have their best interests in mind? Respond to you? Are you aware of their stress signals? Do you relate to your dog with kindness and positive directions?
- Do both you and your dog enjoy and accept all manner of friendly strangers, some alone and some in small groups, and interact in warm, socially skilled ways?
- You both must be clean, tidy and well-groomed, presenting a professional appearance.
- You and your dog must be able to walk together with a loose lead at all times —no pulling or dragging!
- Your dog must do a sit, a down, a stand for examination, a stay-in-place, and a come-when-called. They must also be able to show excellent manners when their handler stops to chat with another handler and their dog(i.e., not vocalizing or approaching the other dog).

- Your dog must not object to a thorough, all-over handling by a stranger (fingers near mouth, on tail, ears, feet, etc.), and to receiving a restraining hug.
- Your dog must be able to work with you on a flat collar or harness approved for visiting. No prong, choker style, or e-collars are permitted.



Although the process involved in becoming one of our registered therapy dog teams is quite intensive with the orientation, evaluations and mentoring, our teams find their placements to be very rewarding. Our teams are respected partners in Ottawa's healthcare facilities and it is critical that we maintain our high level of standards and practices as we grow.

**Now that you are finished reading this document you must also complete the following:**

- [Watch this video](#) to understand how dogs give consent to petting.
- Read [OTD's test requirements](#)
- [Watch this video](#) to see a demonstration of all the test requirements of the Evaluation.
- Complete the [OTD Self-Assessment](#) (upon submission, our office will receive a copy that we will keep on file should you choose to proceed)
- Register for our next Information Session. The date and time, as well as the registration link can be found on the [Volunteering with Your Dog page of our website.](#)

We look forward to providing you with more information and we hope that you will decide to become a part of Ottawa Therapy Dogs! Thank you!



Thank you!

