



## Loving Animals Providing Smiles: Improving People's Lives Through Therapy Animals

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As someone who has a pet, you're already aware of how much love and joy animals can bring into your life. A lot of information is out there about all the responsibilities and obligations of having pets, but the way they pay you back in loyalty and love is more than a fair exchange. Even just being in the same room with an animal can be such an enriching and rewarding experience. It's no wonder that statistically, people with pets suffer less frequently from afflictions like depression, stress, and loneliness, and that pets can help with recovery or coping strategies for people with serious illnesses, [post-traumatic stress disorders](#) or disabilities.

Given this [wonderful power that animals](#) have, and their unending willingness to share their love and healing with everyone they come into contact with, it's good to know that there are organizations out there helping to connect animals with the people who need them. [Animal-](#)

[assisted therapy](#) has long been accepted as a fantastic way to help people with special needs, but there has always been a gap between the number of people who could benefit from this type of therapy, and the number of qualified animal-assisted therapy teams out there who are ready to help.



[Loving Animals Providing Smiles](#) (LAPS) is an organization that is doing its best to close that gap, by providing therapy animals in any situations where they are needed or could be helpful. This usually involves taking dogs to the people in need, but dogs aren't the only ones who can help - LAPS animal can be cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, horses, llamas, pot-bellied pigs, birds, or any other kind of animal. LAPS therapy teams are comprised of volunteers and their own pets. The teams go through rigorous training to ensure that they maintain the standard of excellence that LAPS clients are accustomed to, and that safety and commitment are top priorities.

LAPS began in 2001 as the brainchild of three individuals who wanted to bring the miracle of animal-assisted therapy to the entire Napa Valley area. These three founding members each had a long history of personal animal-assisted therapy experience, as well as pet training experience, and backgrounds in administration and education. These areas of expertise were perfect to build a foundation from which a quality animal-assisted therapy organization could be born. The LAPS assertion that all kinds of animals can be helpful in the therapy process has been what makes this organization more unique in its approach to therapy work.



As an organization, LAPS has three main goals: to bring animal-assisted therapy wherever it is needed, to increase the number of trained and registered animal therapy teams in the community, and to increase awareness amongst the general public regarding the positive effects that animals can have on human development. To achieve this, volunteers must be serious about their dedication to the organization, and must have an attitude toward animal therapy that demonstrates the utmost compassion and respect for those in need of care. In short, LAPS therapy teams are skilled, loyal, and enthusiastic about their work.

LAPS has a history of working with many different kinds of groups in order to help animals help people. For example, LAPS teams have worked with special needs children for over 10 years, providing animal-assisted therapy for kids with special needs. Other programs for minors include sessions for troubled teens and juveniles, which focus on teaching kids the value of unconditional love, and how to communicate feelings and thoughts in positive ways. There is also a program called CAPERS (Children and Pets Enjoy Reading Success), that provides personal reading assistance to kids in elementary school.

But kids are certainly not the only ones who can benefit from animal assistance. Elderly people in assisted-living or nursing facilities often find themselves with nothing to think about except their circumstances, and dwelling on this can lead to various emotional and physical health issues. In these cases, LAPS teams can come in and give these individuals some mental "time off" from the stresses and strains of daily life. By bringing animals into the environment, there is an instant dose of happiness, smiles, and even laughter. Pets can make any place seem more home-like, and being able to pet and interact with animals can help relieve the stress brought on by illness, injury, or even just loneliness.

LAPS also provides the opportunity for schools and other community groups to request special one-off visits or seminars to help raise awareness of various issues. For example, teams might go into an elementary school to do a demonstration on dog safety for the children. Private groups can also request LAPS seminars that detail the benefits of animal-assisted therapy, and how this kind of therapy could help their group. Speakers at these seminars are experienced handlers who are fully prepared and qualified to answer any questions the group might bring up. LAPS teams also enjoy showing up for special occasions like Christmas parties, if the presence of an animal-assisted therapy team would prove beneficial.





LAPS therapy sessions are generally based on multiple therapy teams working together to create a positive experience for everyone involved. This means that there is always a growing need for more and more teams to be trained and registered. Those who are interested in going through the training program with their pets can begin by visiting the various LAPS programs with their pet, to experience what a successful session looks like, and to learn what is entailed in the different types of sessions. Some teams may find that certain programs fit their schedule better than others, or just that they find certain programs more interesting.

All new teams that register as volunteers with LAPS go through an extensive hands-on training period, so that they can learn how to interact with clients in a beneficial and professional manner. This involves training classes, a home study course, and a guidelines manual that team members need to be familiar with. Trained teams are registered with Delta Society/Pet Partners, and must renew their registration every two years in order to demonstrate ongoing commitment to maintaining and developing skill levels.

Some people who are considering volunteering for LAPS may look at the membership process and think that it's all a bit too much, that the training requirements are excessive and unnecessary. But LAPS prides itself on highly skilled therapy teams, an incredibly low turnover rate, and an extremely impressive safety and reliability record. In other words, making the membership process so involved insures that those who make the effort to go through it all are truly dedicated to the cause, and are willing to do whatever it takes to make a difference in the lives of those in need.

The commitment, of course, doesn't end when the training period ends. Active members are expected to participate in a minimum of two therapy sessions per month, and are also required to attend meetings and help in more supportive roles like assisting with fundraisers and special events. If you make a commitment to be a LAPS member, you have to understand that it is more

than just therapy sessions - your dedication to the entire organization is vital. The people in the communities that LAPS serves count on the organization to come through for them, and that strong work ethic trickles all the way down to the very newest members.



On the other side of the coin, if you work in a managerial or administrative role at a facility that you think would benefit from the presence of animal-assisted therapy, you can contact LAPS to discuss your options. Of course, the number of programs that can be scheduled is limited by the number of teams ready and available, but the organization does the best it can to meet the needs of potential new clients.

If you want to get the ball rolling for a LAPS program at your facility, first you will have to go through a trial program phase. During this part of the process, you will be asked to provide LAPS with as much information as possible about the facility, and what you hope to accomplish by including animal-assisted therapy in your monthly program of events. LAPS will work with you to ensure that everything gets set up efficiently and correctly during the trial period, and a program coordinator will continue to check in on a regular basis to assess how things are going and make any adjustments as necessary.



Even if you are not in a position where you and your pet can become a fully qualified LAPS therapy team, you can still become a part of the organization and make a very meaningful contribution. LAPS is continually recruiting associate members to help out with all aspects of organizational support, and the requirements for becoming an associate member are much less involved than for full therapy teams. Associate members do not have the same attendance or dues requirements as full members, and in fact the only requirement is to support the LAPS volunteer values of integrity, commitment, and quality. Associate members help out when they can, whether it be with fundraising efforts, administrative work, or helping to educate the public on the benefits of the work that LAPS does.

*LAPS is a 501(c)(3) public charity corporation that focuses its efforts on helping people in the community benefit from the positive influences of animal-assisted therapy. If you would like to learn more about how to get involved with LAPS and its work in any capacity, whether on the giving or receiving end, visit <http://www.lovinganimalsprovidingsmiles.org/> for contact details and additional information about LAPS programs.*

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