

PET THERAPY VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

VOLUNTEER SERVICES

Updated 02/26/2026

WELCOME & OVERVIEW

Welcome to the UF Health Shands Pet Therapy Program! This handbook is designed to supplement the Volunteer Handbook and help you understand our Pet Therapy policies and expectations.

PET THERAPY TEAM OVERVIEW

Under the direction of Volunteer Services, you and your certified therapy dog provide one-on-one visits with hospitalized patients on approved units. Therapy dog visits offer a social activity that is beneficial for patients and family members - providing diversion from the normal hospital routine, promoting a sense of play and humor, stimulating physical activity and social interaction, and reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness during hospitalization.

DUTIES

- Check in at the nursing station before entering any patient rooms. Ask for special requests for dog visits and rooms not to visit.
- Help patients and family members interact with your dog.
- Wash/Sanitize your hands frequently – always before entering a patient room, in-between visits with each patient, and when you're done with your shift.
- Maintain a safe environment for patients by following all hospital and volunteer guidelines.
- Turn in copies of your dog's registration and vaccination records as they are updated.
- Ensure that patients, staff, and visitors sanitize their hands ***before and after*** petting your dog.

LIMITATIONS

- Do not take patients off their unit.
- Only visit areas assigned to you by Volunteer Services.
- Do not enter rooms that require Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (such as gowns, gloves, or masks) unless specifically asked to by Volunteer Services.

QUALIFICATIONS

- Current certification through one of the organizations listed on our website. Teams must be in good standing with certifying organization.
- Friendly and outgoing
- Able to volunteer independently
- Comfortable interacting with a wide variety of people

INFORMATION FOR THE HANDLER

PET THERAPY CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Your therapy dog must be currently certified through one of the following approved organizations:

- Alliance of Therapy Dogs
- Canine Companions
- GRRMF Hearts of Gold Therapy Team
- Pet Partners

- Therapy Dogs International

Continued certification is required to volunteer at UF Health Shands Hospital.

REQUIRED VACCINATIONS & PAPERWORK

THERAPY DOG

Each dog is required to meet the minimum criteria below, and any additional requirements set by their certifying organization:

- Rabies vaccine (1 or 3 years)
- DHPP (Distemper, Hepatitis, Parvovirus, Par influenza)
- Negative stool exam for parasites

Dogs must be deemed by a veterinarian to be in good physical and mental health and free of contagious disease.

Please submit documentation to the volunteer office when your dog's vaccinations are updated. If your dog requires medication or medical treatment, please submit documentation from your veterinarian that your dog is cleared to resume volunteering before returning to visit at UF Health.

VOLUNTEER DRESS CODE

As mentioned in the Volunteer Handbook, all volunteers are required to wear a uniform. Please dress in your full volunteer uniform when visiting and volunteering with your dog. Distinct from volunteers in our general program, therapy dog handlers wear a green polo.

VISITING WITH YOUR THERAPY DOG

PREPARING FOR YOUR SHIFT

Please walk your dog prior to entering the hospital to reduce the chance of toileting accidents. It is recommended that you carry a cross body bag, or fanny pack to keep necessary supplies, like cleaning wipes. If your dog has an accident, please clean up after your dog, and then notify Environmental Services immediately for additional disinfection.

VISITING GUIDELINES

When you arrive on a unit, check in with the nurse's station for any special instructions.

VISITING PATIENT ROOMS

- Check doors for precaution signs- **don't enter any that require you to wear a gown, gloves, or mask.**
- Knock on the door before entering the room.

- Stop in doorway of room, explain you have a therapy dog with you and obtain permission from all individuals in the room before entering.
- If the patient or family does not want a dog visit, smile and move on to the next patient room. Do not try to talk them into a visit with your dog.
- Do not visit with patients while they are eating or drinking, do not permit the patient to eat or drink while interacting with the dog.

GENERAL INTERACTIONS

Always keep your dog under your control. You are responsible at all times for your dog's behavior. The following behavior is expected of your dog:

- Refrain from interacting with other dogs.
- Only interact with patients/visitors after you give them permission
- No jumping on patients, visitors, or staff
- Dog remains calm and approachable
- Dog remains on leash and leash is in your hand at all time
- Dog's paws remain on the floor at all times unless the patient requests the dog to join them in bed. (Before placing a dog on a patient's bed, lay a gown down as a barrier so that the dog doesn't exchange any germs with the patient's bedding)

WHEN INTERACTING WITH PATIENTS, VISITORS, AND STAFF

- Smile! And say "Hello"
- Use a friendly tone
- Make eye contact
- Introduce yourself
- Ask patient's name
- Listen patiently
- Give the patient time to answer or respond
- Sit or crouch down to the patient's level
- Introduce your dog
- Breed, age, name
- Show off tricks and cute quirks
- Ask if they have any pets at home.

OBSERVING PATIENT EXPERIENCES

- Watch the patient carefully. Be aware of their body cues and body language and terminate your visit when appropriate.
- Leave quickly and appropriately if the patient becomes upset, frightened or unhappy.
- Use appropriate conversation, questions, and humor for the patient's age.
- ***Do not ask questions about why they are in the hospital or when they are going home.***
- Respect directions from family members, patient, and/or staff
- Ask permission before moving furniture to allow easier access for the dog. Replace the furniture at the end of your visit.
- Watch for patients being too rough with your dog. Stop the activity immediately and show the patient how the dog likes to be petted, or leave the room if the activity continues.
- Keep dog away from medical equipment, tubes and bandages
- Do not sit on the patient's bed.

- Leave the patient's room when medical staff enters.
- Relate any questions or concerns you may have about a patient to nursing staff.

PLEASE PRIORITIZE PATIENT INTERACTIONS AND KEEP VISITS WITH STAFF TO A MINIMUM.

VISITING IN OUR HOSPITAL

Our hospital system can be large and confusing. The Volunteer Services team will work as a resource to help you navigate. Maps and other tools will be provided to you when you get started!

APPROVED AREAS TO VISIT

Let Volunteer Services know what types of environments your dog is most comfortable in. Some prefer spaces that are open, and allow people to walk up to them, like waiting areas. Others do not mind walking in and out of unfamiliar rooms. We will do our best to place you and your dog in the area that is the best fit for your dog and our patients. If your dog is not comfortable in the area you're assigned, we are happy to help you relocate to another area.

PROHIBITED AREAS TO VISIT

Some areas are off-limits for dogs due to hospital and infection control policies. If at any time you are asked to visit an area that you are not assigned, please respectfully decline and ask staff to contact Volunteer Services to request a visit. If you would like, you can get cards from Volunteer Services to share when this situation arises.

- Isolation rooms (Any room that requires you to wear gloves, gown, or mask, such as those below)
- Intensive Care Units (Also known as ICU's) or immunocompromised units– Visiting is only allowed when requested by Volunteer Services staff

DO NOT VISIT PATIENT ROOMS WITH ANY OF THE FOLLOWING SIGNS









IF YOU ARE ASKED BY A STAFF MEMBER OR PATIENT TO VISIT A ROOM THAT REQUIRES YOU TO WEAR A GOWN, GLOVES, OR MASK, POLITELY DECLINE AND LET THEM KNOW THAT IT IS TO PROTECT THE HEALTH OF THE PATIENTS BECAUSE DOGS AREN'T ABLE TO WEAR THESE ITEMS THAT STOP THE SPREAD OF INFECTION. IF THEY HAVE QUESTIONS, ASK THEM TO CALL VOLUNTEER SERVICES FOR MORE INFORMATION.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN VISITING WITH PATIENTS ON THE 5TH FLOOR AT SELECT REHAB HOSPITAL, PLEASE CONTACT RANDAL HAMILTON RHAMILTON@SELECTMEDICAL.COM.

HEALTH & SAFETY

INFECTION CONTROL

The following infection and safety measures are for the protection of the patient, your dog, and you. You must follow these guidelines every time you volunteer with your dog to help reduce the spread of infection in the hospital.

- Bathe your dog (wet or dry bath) 24 hours or less before your visit. They should be well groomed (brushed, nails trimmed, ears clean and overall clean and free of odor).
- Dogs cannot lick or “kiss” patients, visitors, or staff at any time.
- Carry sanitizing gel with you while volunteering. Small bottles of gel are available in Volunteer Services. Offer the gel to anyone who pets your dog and use it as required on your own hands.

Wash your hands or use the hand sanitizer:

- Before and after you enter a patient’s space
- Before and after patient contact
- After using the restroom
- After sneezing and coughing

Do not visit with your dog starting from onset of and until at least one week beyond the resolution of:

- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Urinary or fecal incontinence
- Sneezing or coughing of unknown or suspected infectious origin
- Treatment with non-topical antimicrobial or any immunosuppressive medication
- Parasites (including fleas and ticks) or mange
- Ear or skin infection, including “hot spots”
- Any conditions that, in the opinion of your veterinarian, could result in pain or distress to your dog
- Is in heat
- Surgery or open wounds

SAFETY

- Do not leave your dog alone or under the control of anyone else.

- Do not assist a patient in moving, getting in/ out of bed, eating, or any other care-taking task. Get a nurse to help instead.
- Do not bring food, candy, gum or drinks to a patient.

INCIDENT PROCEDURE

In the event of an injury or other incident (scratch, bite or any other inappropriate animal behavior):

- End your visit and leave the room
- Report scratch, bite, or other injury to nursing staff immediately so wounds can be cleaned and treated promptly
- Share the incident with Volunteer Services
    - In the case of accidental scratches, the situation will be reviewed and appropriate measures will be taken to prevent similar injuries from occurring again
    - In the case of bites, intentional scratches or other serious, inappropriate behavior, the animal's visiting rights will immediately be withdrawn
- Complete any reports required by your registering agency/organization and provide a copy to Volunteer Services.

PATIENT PRIVACY

PATIENT PHOTOS

Patients may ask for you to take a picture of them with your dog. You may take a picture of the patient with ***their*** device. However, you cannot take pictures of patients with your device.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Patients have a right to privacy. Information you hear or receive from staff, patients, or families must be kept confidential. If you feel information you have been told should be shared with staff, encourage the patient and/or family member to discuss it with their nurse. If the patient and/or family refuse to do so and you feel it is important to the patient's safety, please tell a nurse on the unit you are visiting.

PROGRAM PHOTOS







