

Choosing Safe, Reliable Pet Care

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On a recent hot July afternoon I picked up an urgent email from a long-time client. She had left Sophie, her 12 year old black lab mix, with a dog walker while her family was away on vacation. This dog walker was an employee of their regular dog sitter so they trusted that Sophie would be in good hands.



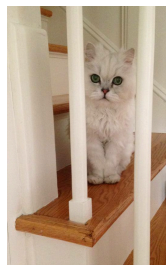
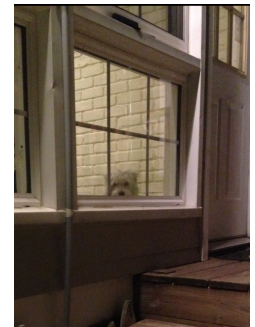
The dog walker had taken Sophie and a few other dogs to the park on a 95 degree afternoon and somehow “forgot” Sophie in the car for 45 minutes. Sophie did not survive this tragic mistake.

Hearing the news of Sophie’s passing prompted mixed feelings of sadness, frustration, and anger. But mostly, it motivated me to launch a public awareness campaign to remind people that it really does matter how and who you choose to care for your pets.

In order to determine the best and most responsible course of action, there are a number of factors to consider.

Outline Your Pet Care Needs

- The number and species of pets will dictate whether in-home care is a necessity or if boarding elsewhere is an option. Multiple species households may require more than one visiting pet sitter.
- Characterize pets as friendly, social, adaptable to new people and new situations, easily handled and transported, or skittish, anxious, and aggressive with new people and environments.
- Special needs pets may be geriatric with ongoing medication requirements, have mobility issues, have hearing or vision deficits, or have behavioral issues such as aggression with other animals, kids, or adults. It is particularly important that blind animals are kept in a stable unchanging environment.
- The length of time you will be away will vary from long work days or day long events, to overnights, to extended time away for vacation and business.
- Home environments need to be easily accessed and managed by a pet sitter, securely fenced, and have a safe area for dog walks.
- Dogs may be grouped by breed, size, age, activity level, medical conditions, and behavior- friendly, aggressive towards or afraid of other dogs, kids, strangers, fence climber, or digger. etc.
- Your pet care budget may dictate whether you select a boarding facility, pet sitter’s home, or custom in home care.



Explore Your Options

- Friends, relatives, and neighbors know your pets, are less expensive, but are not necessarily well trained in animal care.
- Dog walkers offer single or group walks, single or multiple dog group visits to dog parks, and dog camps in fenced yards. Qualifications are not standardized or regulated.
- Professional dog walkers and pet sitters are trained in dog and other pet care, recognize medical issues and know what to do in the case of an emergency. They understand how to group compatible dogs for daycare and multiple dog walking and boarding services. They may have experience and specialized training in caring for birds, rodents, reptiles, and other exotic pets. Some are certified by organizations like Pet Sitters International and The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters. These certification programs encompass a wide range of aspects of pet sitting including pet safety, pet behavior and training, and business aspects of running a pet sitting service. The best pet care professionals have high standards for keeping your pet healthy, comfortable, and safe.
- Boarding in a pet sitter's private home usually provides 24 hour care on the premises, but they may take in multiple dogs. There might be kids and other pets in the household, potential household dangers, and they may or may not have secure fencing, gates, and doorways.
- State Animal Control monitoring is usually only applicable when a dog care business "boards" an animal overnight. An in-home boarding set-up is considered a kennel and is usually required to have a state issued kennel license. Licensed kennels must fulfill certain criteria which is enforced with onsite visits by state animal control officers. However, many in-home businesses operate under the state regulatory radar.
- Larger kennel facilities must follow state licensing and animal care regulations, and standardized building codes. They frequently offer day care, dog training, grooming, and overnight care.

Finding Reliable, Qualified Pet Care

While there is no shortage of dog walkers and pet sitters, unfortunately, there is a shortage of laws and certifications that impose a standard of care on this ever expanding field. Most state and local animal control offices do not monitor or enforce any legal standards on dog walkers and in-home pet sitters. While many individuals have legitimate businesses that are insured and bonded, there is usually no state licensure for dog walkers or pet sitters. The same goes for smaller in-home doggie daycares.

There are a number of places to find pet sitters and pet care facilities.

- Word of mouth referrals.
- Neighborhood and local social media pages.
- Online national and local directories, and web searches. Online pet care directory websites are not strictly regulated, although some may provide insurance and veterinary backup for sitters listed on and contracted through their site.
- Business cards and information pamphlets can be found at most pet stores, veterinary hospitals, and on bulletin boards all around town. It can be difficult to differentiate between responsible professionals and amateur animal lovers.

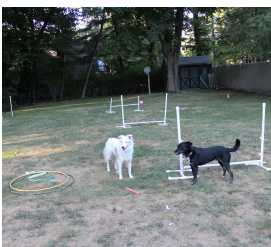
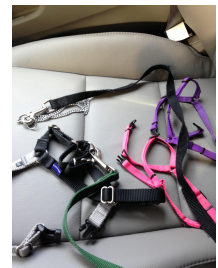
Key Questions to Ask Dog Walkers and Pet Sitters

Whether or not you choose to use a certified professional pet sitter, licensed kennel, a part time dog walker, or someone who pet sits from their own home, there are important considerations and key questions you should ask before leaving your pet. Be sure to check references from pet professionals, veterinarians, and current clients of the businesses you are interested in hiring for your pet's care. If possible, visit with dog walkers and pet sitters on site, at parks, and at their homes, to see first hand how they structure their services and care for their client's pets.

- Who are these dog walkers, pet sitters, and kennel workers who ask you to trust them with your precious pets? What are the qualifications of the person running the pet care business as well as the person directly in charge of your pet's care? Have they taken pet safety training classes and pet CPR courses? Do they carry a first aid kit? Are they a certified dog trainer, vet tech, or pet sitter? How many years have they been working with dogs, cats, and other species? Do they have positive reviews and referrals?
- What emergency protocols do they have in place for pets in their care? It is very important that your dog walker, pet sitter, or kennel have emergency plans in place, relationships with veterinarians, and are able to transport dogs and other pets safely.
- Does your pet sitter keep a file for each pet in their care which includes vaccine records, a summary of recent medical issues, a list of current medications, and the pet's regular veterinarian's contact information? In addition, all pets should have individualized instruction sheets covering feeding, general maintenance (cage and gate latches), handling, exercise, special needs, safety, and emergency contact information.

Questions Specifically for Dog Walkers

- What services do they provide? Dog walkers (and pet sitters) typically offer leash walking, fenced area play, on and off lead dog park visits, day-care, and overnight sitting in your home or theirs. Do they use harnesses and 6 foot leads, flexi leashes, or are dogs off leash? What route will they take for walks? Do they take your dog to parks or dog runs he is already familiar with or to new places?
- How many dogs do they care for at one time? Many dog walkers take groups of dogs to off leash non-fenced dog parks. What control do they have over so many dogs at once? What happens if one dog of the 6 they are with gets scared and takes off out of the park into the woods or onto a busy road, gets into a fight with another dog, or gets into toxic plants such as mushrooms during an off leash stroll? Does the dog walker have a plan for such emergency situations? In large wooded parks, dog walkers may not have a continuous view of their dogs. Do they minimize the risk of off leash, unfenced park visits by working in synch with other dog walkers?



- Does the dog walker address the liability of open off leash dog parks by offering safer doggie day camps in fenced yards? Some run regular "play groups" of 4-6 dogs rotating daily between different client's fenced yards. This way, the dogs are contained and usually have been systematically grouped by size, age, temperament, and socialization.
- Is the dog walker respectful of the weather? What accommodations do they make for extreme heat? Do they schedule walks in the early morning or later evening, watching feet on hot asphalt and pool decks? Do they have ample fresh water available, sprinklers and hoses, and shady areas for cooling off? On cold snowy and icy days, do they have indoor facilities for dogs to exercise and play?
- When transporting your dog by car, do they use seat belt harnesses, crates and carriers, or are the dogs loose on the back seat? How many dogs are in the car at once, and what distances are they traveling? What precautions do they take when transporting dogs during hot and cold weather extremes? Are dogs left in the car unattended?

Questions Specifically for Pet Sitters

- What hours will the sitter be at your house? Will they stay overnight? How many visits will they make during the day and will they bring other pets and people with them? Will your dog be comfortable with the visit schedule?
- What types of pets do they have experience with? Many households have multiple pets of different varieties which include dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, rodents, and fish. Each require a different skill set to care for properly. Pet sitters must be open to and capable of learning about your “other” pet’s needs or you should consider hiring more than one pet sitter to come care for the different species.
- If they smoke cigarettes, you’ll need to set non-smoking areas to keep your pets safe.

In Home Dog Care

There is a wide range of dog care needs which make searching for the best dog care situation tricky. Take time to characterize your dog(s) personality, socialization, and overall lifestyle.



- Is your dog aggressive towards other dogs? He may be great with kids and adults, but definitely not suited to going to off leash dog parks and doggie daycares with your pet sitter.
- Does your small or elderly dog need to be protected from young, energetic, large breed dogs, even in their own household? Multi-dog and multi-pet households are challenging and require an experienced pet sitter.
- Will the dog sitter come meet with you and your pets for an in depth “tour” of your household and pets? Feeding schedules, sleeping areas, and restricted areas in the house should be explained carefully. Harnesses, leashes, car restraints, and other “equipment” should be discussed with dog sitters. Detailed written instructions should be left for review.

In Home Cat Care

Some cats can be left alone overnight but it is always best to have a pet sitter visit at least once or twice a day if you can’t arrange for overnight care.



- Does the pet sitter have a routine cat care program already in place? Cat food dishes should be checked to be sure the cat is eating. Litter boxes need to be checked to be sure cats (especially male cats) are urinating.
- Is the pet sitter well versed in cat diseases, toxins, and emergency situations? There are many illnesses that seem to crop up when cats are home alone so it’s always best if the pet sitter can have a look at the cats at least once a day.
- Will the pet sitter keep track of your cats? Outdoor cats should be left inside when families are away, if at all possible. Otherwise, careful timing of visits is required.

In Home Bird Care

- Does the pet sitter have experience caring for small, large, or outdoor birds? Are they aware of household dangers such as fumes from teflon pots and pans and cleaning products, drafts, open windows, ceiling fans, cooking pots of water, and open toilet covers? Smoking near birds is very dangerous and different foods can be very toxic to birds as well.
- Are your birds contained in cages with tricky latches, in safe rooms, or outdoors in a secure aviary or coop? It is very important to go over how cages and door locks work, as well as your bird's habits when cages and coops are opened for cleaning.
- Do your birds need to be handled? This is best managed by a pet sitter with bird care experience.



In Home Rodent, Reptile, and Fish Care

- Does the pet sitter have experience taking care of small caged animals? Spend time with your pet sitter before your trip to be sure details are clear and are recorded on an instruction sheet.
- Are cage latches secure with easy to use locks, covers, and trays?
- Heating lamps and other electrical equipment should have safety mechanisms in place to assure they are working properly while you are away. Are there backup batteries or generators in case of a power outage?



In Home Care of Special Needs Pets

- Is the pet sitter patient, strong, and willing to take time to give special needs pets the extra care required to keep them clean and comfortable? Elderly pets generally have mobility issues, need ongoing medication, and require gentle relaxed handling. Ramps, harnesses, slings, waterproof pads, and special bedding are particularly important for older dogs and cats.
 - Are they sensitive to and do they understand the special needs of your disabled pets? Hearing and vision impaired pets have to be supervised carefully to keep them safe, especially when outdoors. Blind animals easily adapt to their environments as long as everything remains in the same place. Food and water dishes must be placed where the blind dog, cat, bird, hamster, or lizard expect to find them. Inadvertently moving a blind animal's water dish can be deadly. Cage doors and safety gates at the top of staircases must be closed to keep blind animals from injuring themselves. Blind and deaf dogs must be leashed or exercised in a securely fenced area to prevent them from walking or running off with no way to reliably call them back.
- Special needs pet's instruction sheets are extremely helpful to pet sitters. Include emergency contacts.



Boarding in a Kennel or a Pet Sitter's Home

Make sure to ask a few targeted questions to ensure legitimacy and trustworthiness when leaving your pets in an unfamiliar environment.

- What are the individual pet health requirements for overnight boarding in kennels or at a pet sitter's home, group daycare, and group dog walking services? Which vaccines are required and how often do they ask that dogs have stool samples checked for parasites? Do they have insurance, and are they bonded? Are they a licensed kennel?
- For in home daycare and boarding, are there restricted areas and safe zones for pets? Are they aware of household dangers and toxins to insure a thoroughly pet proofed house? Do they have a fenced yard? Are there multiple employees, kids, or other pets in the house? What is the pet to sitter ratio? Will dogs be grouped by size, age, temperament, and breed?
- Where are pets kept? Are they crated or kept gated in specific areas of the house? Where do they sleep? Do you provide their own bedding and crates?
- Will they feed your dog's regular food and treats? And will they administer medications? Be sure to bring enough food and medications to last for the full stay.
- Are there provisions for sick animals, an isolation area for pets with contagious illnesses, and do they have a working relationship with a local veterinarian?



Boarding Facilities

- Find out about your state's kennel licensing requirements and when the kennel was last inspected. Kennels must be licensed in most states which means that there are mandatory standards of care, safety, and cleanliness.
- Ask about ownership and staffing. Some, but not all facilities have supervisors and staff trained in working with individual as well as groups of dogs, first aid, and dog CPR. An onsite dog trainer provides an added degree of safety at some kennels.
- Do you prefer a small or large kennel setting? Ask about drop off and pick up hours and special services offered. Some offer on site dog training, daycare, and many offer walks and playtime for boarding dogs.
- Learn about accommodations. Some are luxurious, with bedroom type housing furnished with couches and TVs, and others provide the bare essentials. Exercise areas range from individual dog runs, to indoor play group rooms, and many offer play time in outdoor fenced areas. How often are these areas thoroughly cleaned?
- Does the kennel make accommodations for small, shy, young, and older pets? A large kennel can be intimidating and overwhelming to many smaller and shy dogs. So many facilities have small and large dog kennel and daycare areas to accommodate different groups of dogs. Special needs medical boarding is also available at veterinary hospitals and some specialty boarding facilities.
- Is there a specific boarding area for cats? Cats may be housed in small cages, in spacious cat condos, or in open cat rooms. Transmissible cat diseases are always a concern when cats are housed in close quarters.
- Are smaller pets accepted at the boarding facility? Birds, rodents, and reptiles need to be kept in quiet, warm, draft free environments. Lighting and nutrition are very important for birds and reptiles.
- What specific dog and cat vaccines are required and how often does the kennel require stool samples to be checked for parasites? Most kennels require updated vaccines and stool checks to decrease the likelihood of transmissible viruses and parasites. Feline leukemia virus and FIV blood testing might be required for cats.

- Are tours of the boarding facility available to potential new customers? It's a good idea to visit and compare kennel and boarding facilities. Cleanliness and staff training are key points to observe. Buildings should be equipped with smoke detectors, sprinkler systems, and building security systems. Most boarding facilities are contained with doors and fencing so that dogs and cats are unlikely to "escape". Many facilities have 24 hour on premise staffing.
- If possible, have your dog spend a day or two at the kennel before leaving them for an extended stay.

Take Them With You?

Of course, taking your dog and other pets along with you is a welcome alternative for many. Depending on the type of travel, small dogs are easy to take along. Traveling with cats, birds, and small caged animals can be a little more complicated, but it can be done for certain pets.

Most hotels and campgrounds allow at least one small well behaved dog. There are many dog friendly stores, parks, and communities across the country where dogs are welcome. When traveling with pets you need to be aware of the weather, both hot and cold, so be prepared to eat in the air conditioned car or outside on a park bench, with your dog. Check out veterinary hospitals, daycare, and boarding facilities at your travel destination just in case you have an emergency or need to leave your pets for a few hours or overnight.



Find a Successful Match



Whatever your individual pet care needs are, learn about and know your options so that you will feel comfortable with who is taking care of your beloved pets. Most importantly, be sure your pet's are in a care situation where they will be happy, healthy, and safe.

Melissa Shapiro, DVM is the owner of the Visiting Vet Service (visitingvetservice.com), a 27 year old mobile veterinary practice offering individualized at-home veterinary care to dogs and cats in all stages of life. In 2012, Dr. Shapiro opened Your Senior Pet's Vet (yourseniorpetsvet.com), to offer custom in-home wellness, palliative, hospice, and end of life care to special senior cats and dogs. Your Senior Pet's Vet works to insure dignity and a good quality of life for elderly and chronically ill pets and their people. When necessary, Dr. Shapiro has access to a full service local animal hospital for diagnostic, treatment, and surgical needs.