

**COURTHOUSE THERAPY DOGS
SECOND JUDICIAL CIRCUIT - WAKULLA COUNTY
PROCEDURES**

Participants: Second Judicial Circuit, State Attorney (criminal program), TMH Animal Therapy, the Clerk of the Courts for Wakulla County and Guardian Ad Litem (dependency program).

Overview/Purpose: Children in dependency court and victims as witness in criminal court are sometimes required to wait for an extended period of time before they testify in court. This wait produces high level of anxiety for some, particularly children and others in vulnerable situations. Many studies show that the interaction with friendly animals provides both emotional and physical benefits. Animal therapy teams will be available to interact with children/victims while they wait to testify. The goal is to have the children/victims be more comfortable and able to provide more accurate testimony. For purposes of this program animals used will be dogs. Animal therapy teams will be used while the children/victims are waiting to testify, possibly during testimony and to the extent possible, be available at the conclusion of the testimony.

Target Population and Events/Scope: The target population for the dependency court program is all children (ages birth to 18) appearing for any dependency court proceeding. Children (as well as parents/custodians and other court participants) are invited to interact with the animal therapy team in a group setting environment while they wait for their case to be heard. The target population for the criminal court program is victims of violent crime, age five and over, providing testimony in court (primarily trials) and depositions, who the state attorney victim advocate feels would benefit from the presence of an animal therapy team. Additionally, animal therapy teams are available for trial preparation. Specific victims will be identified by the state attorney victim advocate. It is estimated that animal therapy teams will be needed approximately two - four times per month. (This estimate is provided for planning purposes and is non-binding.) Depending on the success of the program, the target population may be expanded with the approval of the participating parties and chief judge.

TMH Animal Therapy: TMH Animal Therapy is an animal visitation and activity program comprised of volunteers. Animal therapy teams visit long-term care facilities, day treatment programs, assisted living residences, rehabilitation centers, hospitals, public libraries, schools and domestic violence shelters to promote motivational, recreational, and therapeutic benefits. All animals and handlers in the program have passed nationally recognized skills and aptitude tests by Pet Partners. The animals have been examined by a veterinarian to ensure good health. Additionally, each animal therapy team has liability insurance policy in the amount of \$1,000,000. Pet Partners and TMH Animal Therapy rules require that animals be leashed at all times with the handler in control of the animal and leash. Additionally, handlers are responsible for the clean-up of animal eliminations. Animal therapy teams must adhere to all TMH Animal Therapy and Pet Partner policies.

Application Form: Each handler will be required to complete an application form prepared by the Office of Court Administration. The application form will contain information sufficient to conduct a background check.

Background Checks: Each handler will be required to undergo a background check performed by the Office of Court Administration. These background checks are in addition to the background checks conducted by TMH Animal Therapy. The specific findings of the check are confidential, however, the Office of Court Administration can advise TMH Animal Therapy as to whether the applicant was approved or not approved.

Confidentiality Agreement: Handlers will be required to maintain the confidentiality of all information including, but not limited to, information pertaining to children/victims and their families, whether written or verbal, received through the scope of interaction with the children/victims.

Informational Sheet for Handlers - The Office of Court Administration will prepare an informational sheet for handlers. The informational sheet will include issues related to parking, courthouse access, background checks and oath of confidentiality. Additionally, the informational sheet will include information regarding frequent changes in court schedules and court delays.

Scheduling: In dependency court, court events are scheduled well in advance and volunteers sign-up for visits via email through the Office of Court Administration. In criminal court, the state attorney will request an animal therapy team via email to the TMH Animal Therapy program. The state attorney will provide the tentative date and time the team is needed and will timely advise TMH Animal Therapy of any changes in the schedule. The TMH Animal Therapy coordinator will confirm by email that a team is available and will provide the name of the handler. TMH Animal Therapy will timely advise the requesting party of any changes in the availability of the team, including substitutions. Once an animal therapy team is secured, the requesting party will notify the bailiffs' unit and court administration of the planned visits, and also keep these parties abreast of changes in the schedule.

Identification of Handler: All TMH Animal Therapy teams have TMH Animal Therapy/Pet Partners identification cards and will produce the cards upon entry into the courthouse or upon request of any court official. Animal therapy teams will distinguish themselves as animal therapy teams through some mechanisms such as wearing TMH Animal Therapy or Pet Partners badges and/or logo apparel.

Presence of Third Party: Third parties are required to be present at all times when the animal therapy teams are involved with a child or victim. In dependency court a GAL volunteer may serve as a third party. In the event that a GAL volunteer is not present, visits will take place in a group setting to ensure the presence of a third party. In criminal court the Office of the State Attorney will be required to provide the third party. The third party will typically be the victim advocate for state attorney clients.

Animal Teams and Animal Fatigue: The TMH Animal Therapy program cannot guarantee that a specific animal therapy team will be available for the scheduled event. If a specific gender for the handler is requested, attempts will be made to accommodate that request, however, the majority of the volunteer handlers are female. Because therapy animals are subject to fatigue, particularly in stressful situations, Pet Partners recommends that teams "work" for a maximum of

two hours, though many teams can “work” for much longer periods of time. Therefore, if a team is needed for an extended period of time, TMH Animal Therapy may provide teams on a rotational basis or the team may take rest breaks.

Courthouse/Facility Access: Animal therapy teams are required to go enter the courthouse at the public entrance (located at the rear of the building by the parking lot), go through a security station and present their Pet Partners Identification Badge. In dependency court cases, once volunteer handlers have been trained by court administration personnel, the teams may proceed to the dependency court waiting room (Second Floor) after being cleared by the bailiffs at the security station. In criminal cases the victim advocate or designee will meet the animal therapy teams at the entrance and escort the team to the victim advocate’s office located on the third floor of the courthouse. Teams are prohibited from entering the courtrooms or judicial chambers without the approval of the chief judge and the presiding judge. Additionally, teams may not enter any snack bars, if available. Efforts will be made by the victim assistance personnel and animal handlers to minimize contact with the public and other courthouse employees. Depending on the success of the program, courthouse access may be expanded with the approval of the participating parties, presiding judge and chief judge.

Clean-up: Handlers are trained to arrive early to exercise their animals so they can take care of any elimination issues. Dogs are trained not to eliminate indoors. Outdoor eliminations are cleaned-up by handlers using proper disposal methods to control odors, etc. The Office of the State Attorney agree to vacuum rooms (not corridors) occupied by animal therapy teams used in their cases.

Allergens/Parasites - As required by Pet Partners, handlers will adhere to policies regarding grooming and parasite control in attempts to reduce allergens and/or parasites in the courthouse. These procedures include, but are not limited to, grooming dogs within 24 hours of a visit and the use of, if not exempt, parasite prevention medication. Exempted animals are required to undergo additional grooming procedures to eliminate parasites.

Liability - Each TMH Animal Therapy team has a \$1,000,000 liability policy through Pet Partners.

Workers’ Compensation - If any workers’ compensation issues arise, participants agree to reconvene to address the issue.

Reporting Incidents - The state attorney is responsible for reporting incidents to Brent Thurman, Clerk of the Courts for Wakulla County; Susan Wilson, Director of Data and Research for the Office of Court Administration and Stephanie Perkins, Coordinator of the TMH Animal Therapy Program. Reportable incidents include injuries to a person or animal; situations with a high potential that an injury could have occurred either to a person or an animal, even though no one was hurt at the time; situations with a perception of an accident or injury, and damages to property. If any incidents arise, participants agree to reconvene to address the issue.