

# PET THERAPY BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## (last updated November 2010)

### General Information

1. **Pet therapy comes in different forms.** It ranges from highly skilled dogs being part of a specific medical treatment (e.g., physical therapy) to walking around a facility for “hugging and petting”. What we have at St. Mary’s is in between, but much closer to the hug and pet end. Generally, our dogs are just a small part of the hospital’s support network, but every once in a while may have a deeper interaction with a patient or their family. Pet Therapy also can be in the form different activities such as reading programs for children.
2. **It is important to consider the type of interaction you and your dog desire.** Nursing homes offer the opportunity to build longer-term/deeper relationships, while the majority of interactions in a hospital are just a few minutes. What is nice about the hospital is that every visit is different and you will get the opportunity to work with a much wider range of people. Every so often, longer-term relationships can be established with patients and their families, especially those that are in the hospital for extended periods.
3. **The program at St. Mary’s started in 2004 with a single team visiting two units.** By the end of 2010, it is up to 26 teams visiting 16 units. It has been a great success and fully embraced by the hospital. In some ways, this program almost benefits staff as much as patients and their families.
4. **No specific breed limitations in the St. Mary’s program.** The national organizations do not ban any specific breeds from being certified for pet therapy, but all dogs must pass an evaluation.

### Certification (more specifically known as “Registration”)

1. **You and your dog must be certified through one of three national certification groups.** Delta Society, Therapy Dogs Incorporated, or Therapy Dogs International.
2. **What is certification?** It is not as involved as one may think. Pet Therapy dogs are not service dogs, they are only family pets. Dogs must already be obedient, so certification is focused on:
  - a. Does the handler know what they are doing?
  - b. Does the dog enjoy what it is doing? Many people love the idea of doing pet therapy work, but the most important thing is that the dog also must enjoy it. If they are stressed by it, then it isn’t fair to them. Certification helps to let them have a voice.
3. **Why get certified?** Many nursing homes, for instance, do not require certification, but certification provides two important things:
  - a. You will learn about areas such as operating in a medical facility, handling your dog in different situations, and the subtleties of communication during visits (e.g., often people will start talking about their pet that just passed away which can be very awkward at first).
  - b. All certifications come with liability insurance coverage. You need to remember that you are dealing with a dog (no matter how obedient) and unscripted situations with people often in a more fragile state. This is nice protection to have.
4. **How to get certified?** Different organizations have different approaches. Delta Society provides the majority of teams at St. Mary’s and they have a local chapter that puts on classes 3-4 times a year. The class usually runs over two days on a weekend. After attending the class (without your dog), the handler has several opportunities throughout the year to take a practical exam with the dog. The Delta course includes a demo evaluation to help you figure out what you and your dog may need to work on beforehand. Delta Society also offers a home study option in place of the class. There are other options for Delta classes in Milwaukee, Northern Illinois, and elsewhere. Please see the separate fact sheet on certification for more details about the different organizations.

5. **When are you eligible to get certified?** It depends on the organization, but certification is all about the team, so your dog usually has to be over a year old and living with you for 6-12 months. You cannot get certified to visit with someone else's dog.
6. **How much does it cost to get certified?** It depends on the organization. For example, the Delta class and initial 2-year registration with the national organization runs around \$150-\$200. But, the St. Mary's Foundation has started a scholarship program to cover a large percentage of the cost, depending on funding available and number of people applying for scholarships.

### **Why Join the Program At St. Mary's?**

1. **There are several different opportunities in Madison.** One goal of the St. Mary's program is to get more people into Pet Therapy. So, it is important to note that there are other programs in Madison. Pet Pals, at the UW, may be the most well known. It is a well-established program focused on children. It also allows you access to places such as the Ronald McDonald House.
2. **What is nice about what has been set up at St. Mary's is that teams have access throughout most of the hospital.** Teams can go to 16 different units including Pediatrics, Psychiatric, Cardiac, Medical-Surgical, Intensive Care, and even ER. Teams also visit the hospital's Sun Prairie Emergency Center.
3. **The program at St. Mary's is set up to be as structured or flexible as you want.** This is done to encourage as many visits as possible. You are not required to commit to a specific schedule unless you want. Some people like to set a specific day of week/time, while others are more casual based on their schedules.
4. **The frequency of visits also is up to the volunteer.** Some people come weekly while others may come bi-weekly or even monthly. The only suggestion is that as a dog is starting out, it is probably better to do more frequent/shorter visits.
5. **Teams also have complete flexibility in how long they visit.** Most teams average around 1 to 1.5 hours, but it all depends on you and your dog.
6. **As mentioned above, the St. Mary's Foundation ([www.stmarysfoundation.org](http://www.stmarysfoundation.org)) has started a scholarship program.** All that is asked of recipients is a commitment to visit at St. Mary's for 6 months. This scholarship also is available when teams need to get recertified. **If you want to take advantage of the scholarship, you will first need to interview with Volunteer Services prior to being approved for the scholarship. The Foundation cannot repay you for money already spent; they must make scholarship checks out to the class provider/certification organization.**

### **How to Get Involved**

1. **You can contact the Program Coordinator if you have more questions.**
2. **Shadowing a team during a visit.** The program coordinator or other teams do make themselves available if you would like to shadow them on a visit to learn more about the program/pet therapy.
3. **Once certified, you would need to go through the normal hospital orientation process.** This includes a, TB test, interview with Volunteer Services, and a 1-2 hour class on hospital rules/procedures.
4. **Supervised Visit(s) with Program Coordinator:** The program coordinator will accompany you and your dog on 1 or more visits. This is to help get you acclimated to the hospital and casually evaluate you and your dog. This is just to ensure there is a good fit and to help identify what units may be a better match. For instance, elevators are new thing to many dogs. The coordinator may work with you on strategies for getting your dog comfortable (if it has a problem) and may use this information to initially assign the team to units more easily accessible by stairs.