

# VHA and Pet Partners Partnership

Supporting Veterans through the Human-Animal Bond

## Partnership Overview

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the nonprofit Pet Partners formed a partnership in 2019 to improve the health and well-being of Veterans through the human-animal bond and to increase access to and knowledge about the benefits of animal-assisted interventions, including animal visitation and animal-assisted therapies.

**Research has shown** that Veterans who own or foster dogs are more physically active, have lower cardiac disease risk, report a higher quality of life, and have better overall health. Additionally, **animal-assisted therapy (AAT)** can be an effective complimentary treatment for mental health and behavioral health disorders like depression and substance (alcohol/drug) use disorder by decreasing stress levels.



## The Human-Animal Bond:

- AAT is one of the most common complementary approaches available to Veterans for mental health care; more than 50% of VA medical centers and health care systems offer AAT for Veterans
- Interactions with animals can improve social connections, provide social support, and decrease loneliness and depression
- Riding horses regularly helped a group of Veterans enhance communication, confidence, and assertiveness
- Cat ownership decreases the risk of fatal heart attacks
- Domestic birds can improve patients' focus and enhance social interactions in geriatric rehabilitations units
- Viewing live fish in an aquarium can promote relaxation and mood and decrease anxiety

## Benefits for All Veterans

Both the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Pet Partners have a shared goal of enhancing the quality of life for Veterans through promoting the human-animal bond and increasing social interactions using pets and therapy animals. The partnership, managed by the National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships (HAP), encourages VA and Pet Partners to increase animal visitation and develop animal therapy programs at VA facilities across the nation. Additionally, **VA resources on suicide prevention** and Veteran culture enable Pet Partners to enhance their training for existing and prospective handlers.

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
National Center for Healthcare  
Advancement and Partnerships

VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships

## Pet Partners Resources and Programs for Veterans:



**Recurring informational webinars** and Facebook Live events educate prospective volunteers on how to participate in Pet Partners' Therapy Animal Program.

**Virtual Visits** allow Veterans to interact with therapy animals throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Working with Veterans** is a course that highlights strategies that can be used to effectively interact with individuals who regularly experience PTSD symptoms.

**The World's Largest Pet Walk** is an annual event to uplift the importance of physical activity to improve health and well-being through the human-animal bond.

Veterans wishing to encourage their children or grandchildren to read can participate in the **We Are All Ears program** – where the pets do all the listening!

## Partnership Goals

VHA and Pet Partners support and improve the health and well-being of Veterans by spreading the benefits of AAT, sharing educational resources, and by creating additional partnerships at local VA medical centers across the country.

## Innovative Strategic Partnerships Facilitated through HAP

HAP's mission is to serve as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships at the national, state, and community level and advance the health and wellbeing of Veterans through exploration of innovative, safe, and ethical emerging therapies.

To learn more about VHA partnerships, please visit: [va.gov/healthpartnerships](https://va.gov/healthpartnerships).

To learn more about AAT at VA, please visit:  
[va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/animal-assisted-therapies.asp](https://va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/animal-assisted-therapies.asp).

Veterans interested in volunteering with Pet Partners can visit [petpartners.org/volunteer](https://petpartners.org/volunteer).

\*Veterans and members of the public are encouraged to adhere to current CDC guidelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic.