



Everything New Orleans

Learn more about the Visiting Pet Program at Saturday orientation

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By **Sheila Stroup, The Times-Picayune**

The Visiting Pet Program is looking for a few good dogs, laid-back lap cats, rabbits and guinea pigs.



SUSAN POAG / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Boston University student Ally Clancy holds a kitten while volunteering at the LA/SPCA in Algiers Tuesday, March 15, 2011. If you own or know of a friendly dog or cat you might want to take part in the Visiting Pet Program.

"We'll take any kind of dog -- small and large, pure-breds and mixed breeds," Lee Gaffney says. "We pride ourselves on looking for personality, not papers."

Whether you have a dog, a cat, or even a rabbit or guinea pig, a therapy pet needs to be gentle and calm.

"But they also have to like people," Gaffney, president of the volunteer group, says.

Most of the animals in the program are dogs, but there are also four or five cats.

"It's harder to find suitable cats," Gaffney says, "but the ones we have are just incredible. They have to like sitting on someone's lap and being petted."

Right now, the program has only one guinea pig. And Timothy Baxter, the therapy rabbit, recently retired after a 10-year career.

"We'd like to have more rabbits and guinea pigs," Gaffney says. "The guinea pigs are really fun because they squeal when they're happy. The residents like that."

If you have a pet who might qualify and you have time to take a little happiness to hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities, attend the people-only volunteer orientation Saturday, June 18. It's from 10 a.m. to noon at the Harahan Senior Center, 100 Elodie Ave., in Harahan. There's a \$10 fee to attend,

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Learn more about the Visiting Pet Progra...

and you need to pre-register by sending an e-mail to **paws4visits@gmail.com**. Volunteers must be at least 18.

The Visiting Pet Program started 24 years ago with a grant at the Louisiana SPCA. When the grant ran out, the volunteers didn't, and they started taking their own pets to people who needed a dose of kindness in their lives. The motto of the local animal-assisted therapy program is "Bringing love and leaving smiles."

Currently around 100 members take therapy animals to visit people in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes.

"But we're always looking for more," Gaffney says.

They also have a literacy project, Reading to Rover. Beginning and reluctant readers practice their reading-aloud skills by reading to dogs at area libraries.

"That's always fun, and the dogs are excellent listeners," Gaffney says.

For more information about the program, go to the **Visiting Pet Program**.

*Sheila Stroup's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday in Living. Contact her at **sstroup@timespicayune.com** or 985.898.4831.*

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