

Visiting Pet Program looking for gentle, outgoing pets

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

"The whole thing we're looking for is temperament," Lee Gaffney says. "It's not like you can train your dog to be a therapy dog. We need gentle, calm pets. Their job is to meet strangers over and over again."

Dogs need to be outgoing, enthusiastic and patient. In other words, better than we are.

"And we're always looking for cats," Gaffney says. "It's harder to find a cat who's okay with getting in a car and going places. But we have four personable cats right now."

Guinea pigs and rabbits need to be gentle and calm, too.

"They sit in a little basket, and they have to be tolerant and able to be petted," Gaffney says.

She remembers one guinea pig from years ago who loved visiting a blind man named Mr. Wyatt.

"That guinea pig would get in the bed, and he was so happy he'd squeal the whole time Mr. Wyatt petted him," she says.

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 Sunday. It's from 2 to 4 p.m. at the Harahan Senior Center, 100 Elodie Ave., in Harahan.

There's a \$10 fee to attend, and you need to pre-register by sending an e-mail to paws4visits@gmail.com.

"Bringing love and leaving smiles" is the motto of the local animal-assisted therapy program.

"It's so much fun to go into a hospital room and see someone's face light up," Gaffney says. "The other reason I keep doing this is for my dogs. They absolutely love it."

The Visiting Pet Program started 22 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.

"When I started almost 19 years ago, there were only seven of us," Gaffney says. "Right before Katrina, we had 160 members."

After the storm, the program lost nearly half its people-pet teams.

"But we only had half as many hospitals, so it kind of worked out," Gaffney says.

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

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 and for the STAIR (Start the Adventure in Reading) program.

"Whenever we go to a library, the librarians get out all their books about dogs," Gaffney says. "My favorite part is when the kids hold up the books and show the pictures to the dogs."

Every March, members have a big picnic and awards ceremony for their dedicated pets. This year, Gaffney's dog Ginny Belle, 13, received a 12-year service award.

"Of course, I'm proud of her," she says.

Evaluation of pets is done in September and January, after the owners have attended a people-only orientation.

Members of the Visiting Pet Program pay \$25 a year to belong.

"We don't have any funding except our dues," Gaffney says. "Our volunteers pay to volunteer. We're very committed."

For more information about the program, go to www.visitingpetprogram.org.

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