

Give Your Cat a Job

Is your cat a candidate for animal-assisted therapy? Several organizations use cats and other animals to help improve the lives of health-care patients.

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In recent years, mounting evidence has shown that pets are a tonic to human health, lowering stress, reducing blood-pressure levels and adding to our general sense of well-being. Today, more cat owners are having their felines certified as therapy cats to visit patients in hospitals and the elderly in nursing homes. If you have career goals for your feline, consider training your pet for animal-assisted therapy.

Pet Partners

The Delta Society, based in Bellevue, Wash., is an international nonprofit organization that unites service and therapy-trained animals with mentally or physically disabled people and patients in health-care facilities to help improve their lives. Delta's Pet Partners Program trains volunteers and screens animal-handler teams and pets for participation in animal visiting and therapy programs in hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and schools.

It takes a special cat to [make therapy visits], said Dianne Bell, the Pet Partners Program coordinator. They must enjoy being petted and be happy to curl up on someone's lap. Cats have a very calming effect on patients because they are able to sit quietly and purr contentedly.

Start Young

If you have therapy-cat career goals for your feline, begin socializing your companion from kittenhood to ensure that he or she is well-adjusted to being handled by strangers.

The period between 2 and 7 weeks of age is known as the primary socialization period, said John Wright, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist and professor of psychology at Mercer University in Macon, Ga. You can change the amount of social preference your kitten has for you if you stroke, pet and play with it during this early stage of its life.

Meet Seahawk

Alice Pursell of Oak Park, Ill., registered her Maine Coon, Seahawk, in 1991 with Pet Partners and takes him to visit people living in assisted-living facilities and nursing homes.

He is such a tonic for the elderly, especially if circumstances forced them to give up their own pets. Pursell said.