

Share the Love

by John McCrae

As we all know Leonbergers are a working breed, but their work on the farm no longer exists. Herding, carting and protecting flocks are memories of long ago. Today, the working Leo now puts the same reliable energy into Sharing the Love with patients at hospitals, nursing homes and institutions. Leonbergers also participate in the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) assisting youngsters to read in elementary schools.

The temperament of a Leo is perfectly suited to therapy work. Typically, they are loving and gentle kissing machines, with patience for those in need. Canine senses are sharper than human sense, and research has shown that dogs are able to anticipate many human health events such as epileptic seizures and cancer. A therapy dog can lower blood pressure, encourage motor skills, trigger speech and bring back wonderful memories of pets at home or those long gone. Inevitably they bring a smile as they Share the Love with others.

To recognize these rewarding pursuits, the LCA created the Leonberger Therapy Award (LTA). The club presents this award to Leo's that met eligibility criteria and have made at least 50 visits to accredited facilities. To learn more about the LTA go to the LCA web site www.leonbergerclubofamerica.com, select Therapy under the Our Dogs Tab where you will find details of the requirements, registration and therapy log forms as well as other resources.

Is Therapy Work For You?



There is no better time than the present to determine if therapy work with your dog is for you! You need to make a personal commitment to training, grooming, handling and making visits that are a cut above the requirements for a house pet. This will consume considerable time in training, preparation and visiting. Ask yourself if interacting with a stranger fits your personality and if you enjoy handling a dog in public. If not, there are other ways to become involved in therapy work such as starting a therapy program at a local facility, or arranging therapy classes as part of your dog club, or working at a specialty for therapy testing. Most of us with Leonbergers have become comfortable with the public attention that our dogs

attract and have told the “Leonberger story” a million times. During therapy work you’ll get the exact same questions from patients, so we are all well rehearsed for therapy. If you have doubts about therapy, it would be a great idea to shadow someone you know on a visit. If you are experienced in therapy, becoming a mentor to a new therapy enthusiast would be extremely valuable to the newbie’s.

Therapy work is rewarding to everybody. The patients will always smile and momentarily forget what ails them. The staff enjoys the break and your Leo will be happy as they really do know what’s going on and you as the handler will be proud of what you both are doing. Therapy is a win, win, win, win situation!

Medical science has recently come to understand the healing powers of therapy animals. They reduce stress, lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol and hasten healing. Leos Heal is one of our slogans. Another is Share the Love.

Evaluating Your Dog

It is important to evaluate your Leo to determine whether or not they are suitable for therapy work. We all know that Leos have spectacular temperaments but that alone does not mean they are perfect to perform therapy. A turbo or shy Leo will certainly require additional training. You also want to be sure that your Leo is outgoing enough to enjoy visiting with people. If your dog adores children, then READ or visiting the pediatric ward at a local hospital could be the best choice. Choose the type of therapy for which both you and dog are best suited. Check out the web site for American Temperament Test Society Inc.

Training for Therapy

You don’t have to wait until you are a certified therapy dog to begin therapy work. Izzy began at 10 weeks accompanying Coach, Mary Ann & I to the hospital, nursing homes and school. You need to check with each organization to be assured that they will permit a puppy “in training” to visit. Socialization, in my opinion, is the best training to prepare a therapy dog for work. Of course you need to take your puppy to training school to teach all the basic obedience skills or do it yourself. Each therapy organization has its own set of lessons to pass their therapy test but they all revolve around the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. The following are the majority of the lessons you must accomplish to be certified.

Accepting a Friendly Stranger, Sitting Politely for Petting, Appearance and Grooming, Walking on a Loose Leash, Walking Through a Crowd, Sit and Down on Command/Staying in Place, Coming When Called, Reaction to Other Dogs, Reaction to Distractions, Supervised Separation, Saying Hello, Ignoring Food, Interaction With Medical Devices.

Therapy Organizations

There are four national therapy organizations that most Leonbergers belong to: Therapy Dogs International, Therapy Dogs Inc., Delta Society and Bright and Beautiful. Each has their own testing evaluators, but Bright & Beautiful is unique in that they have a “long distant testing” which might work for you if you are not near a testing location. Search the Internet for the therapy organization best suited to you.



Preparing For a Visit

In preparation for a visit it is mandatory to have your Leo well groomed, brushed out, nails cut, ears clean and in good health. Never make a visit if either you or your dog is not totally healthy. Spreading disease is one of the top concerns of hospitals as the dogs go from patient to patient. There are very few diseases that both dogs and humans share but the risk of transmission remains in the mind of some in the medical community. Be sure to potty your dog before a visit. Teaching to "do your business" on command is very helpful. If you have a puppy, be equipped to clean up after any type of mess. When you reach the facility, put on the therapy vest or scarf and you are ready to go to work.

The Visit

A typical visit at the hospital probably lasts about 5 to 10 minutes per person. It is very important for the handler to learn how to read people you are about to visit. Most people love dogs, but some are terrified or would prefer not to be bothered. We always announce ourselves to each patient after checking with the nurses' station or persons in authority. Our Leo's will approach the bed to kiss and be petted while I recite the script about Leonbergers. We usually talk about their dogs and normal chit chat. A visit at the nursing home is sometimes done one on one, but often in groups. Here our Leos visits with each, sometimes performs simple tricks (high 5's, shake, rollover, fetch, speak) to entertain. On occasion we would visit intensive care when asked by the staff. It's amazing how our dogs understand the severity of

some illnesses and clearly know when someone is reaching the end of life. We've had a number of very touching visits with those about ready to "cross the bridge". Keep in mind that a therapy visit is hard work and your Leo will begin to show signs of stress and being tired after about an hour. That's the time to end the visit.



The internet is an incredible resource to find everything you ever wanted to know about therapy work. Below are just a few of the organizations

and reading material for you to research. Of course, you call always get in touch with me at johnmcray@aol.com, 603-253-4439, cell 603-707-7162

Share the Love with your Leo and will make a lot of people very happy.

Optional Info

Major Therapy Organizations:

Therapy Dogs International, Inc.

88 Bartley Road

Flanders, NJ 07836

(973) 252-9800

www.tdi-dog.org

Delta Society Pet Partners Program

875 124th Ave NE, Suite 101

Bellevue, WA 98005

(425) 226 7357

E-mail: info@deltasociety.org

www.deltasociety.org

The Bright & Beautiful Therapy Dogs, Inc

80 Powder Mill Rd

Morris Plains, NJ 07950

973-292-3316

www.golden-dogs.org

Therapy Dogs Inc

POB 20227

Cheyenne, WY 82003

877-843-7364

307-432-0272

www.therapydogs.com

My Favorite Therapy Books: all available at www.amazon.com

A Dog Who's Always Welcome – Lorie Long 2008

Therapy Dogs – Kathy Diamond Davis 2002

Working As A Therapy Dog – Breeze Stanart 2002

The Healing Power of Pets – Dr. Marty Becker 2002

Therapy Dogs (Dog Heroes) – Linda Tagliaferro & Wilma Melville 2005

