

CANINE COMFORT



Pet-Assisted Therapy Policies, Guidelines & Requirements • 2026

Valley Humane Society

About Canine Comfort

Valley Humane Society's Canine Comfort Pet-Assisted Therapy Program provides certified therapy dog teams to approved community partners throughout the East Bay. Our nationally recognized program brings comfort, connection, and positive human-animal interaction to people in a wide variety of settings.

Canine Comfort teams represent Valley Humane Society during approved therapy activities and are expected to maintain high standards of behavior, cleanliness, professionalism, safety, and reliability.

1. Program Requirements

- Complete the application process and required screening, including a Valley Humane Society background check.
- Attend Canine Comfort orientation/training.
- Pass the Canine Comfort evaluation with each dog the handler will work with.
- Complete required mentor shifts, any additional mentoring recommended, and the three-month probationary follow-up/observation.
- Maintain required veterinary and program records.
- Volunteer at least twice each month unless on approved leave.
- Follow all Canine Comfort, Valley Humane Society, and facility requirements.
- Remain receptive to coaching and feedback.

2. Handler Requirements

- Be at least 18 and provide/handle their own dog.
- Be specifically approved to work with each dog they handle.
- Wear required identification during approved activities.
- Use approved equipment, maintain physical control of the leash, and never leave the dog unattended.
- Volunteer with only one therapy dog at a time.
- Log volunteer hours, maintain current contact information, and respond to program communications.

3. Dog Requirements

- Be at least one year old and have been under the handler's guardianship for at least six months.
- Pass the Canine Comfort temperament/evaluation process; be calm, friendly, enjoy being petted by strangers, and adapt to different people, sounds, smells, surroundings, and handling.
- Have basic obedience skills.
- Be spayed or neutered, subject to Valley Humane Society's established exceptions.
- Maintain required veterinary care, vaccinations, fecal testing, examinations, and flea prevention.
- Arrive at every visit clean, appropriately groomed, free of noticeable odors, and with appropriately trimmed nails.
- Remain calm, refrain from barking, remain under handler control, and follow the two-foot distance rule.

4. Visit Standards

Before Every Visit

- Exercise the dog appropriately.
- Confirm the dog is clean, groomed, odor-free, and has appropriately trimmed nails.
- Ensure the therapy vest is clean and in good condition; bring required identification and approved equipment.
- Review facility-specific instructions.

During Every Visit

- Keep the dog under control and never leave the dog unattended.
- Keep the dog on an approved leash unless the facility specifically permits otherwise.
- Maintain a minimum two-foot distance from other dogs and do not allow dogs to socialize.
- Refrain from barking or any vocalization; **this is grounds for removal.**
- Watch body language and end an interaction if the dog becomes uncomfortable, overstimulated, or inappropriate for the setting.
- Follow facility rules and maintain professional, respectful interactions with clients, residents, staff, and volunteers.

Approved Equipment

A four-foot leash is required unless a facility specifically approves another arrangement. Retractable leashes, choke chains, electronic/training collars, shock collars, martingale chain collars, and pinch collars are not permitted.

5. Grooming & Appearance

Dogs must arrive at every visit clean, appropriately groomed, with appropriately trimmed nails, and free of noticeable odors. Being recently bathed does not by itself satisfy this requirement; the dog must be clean and odor-free at the visit.

- Vest must be clean and properly worn during approved therapy activities, meeting vest standards.
- Dogs must be appropriately groomed, clean, and odor-free.
- Repeated grooming or odor concerns may require veterinary or grooming follow-up and additional observation before returning to visits.

6. Volunteer Conduct & Communication

- Treat clients, residents, staff, facilities, fellow volunteers, and Valley Humane Society staff respectfully.
- Follow program and facility requirements; arrive prepared and on time.
- Communicate promptly when unable to attend a scheduled commitment.
- Use good judgment and remain aware of the dog's behavior and surroundings.
- Be receptive to reasonable coaching and feedback; address concerns professionally rather than dismissing or escalating them.
- Ask questions when a requirement or instruction is unclear.
- Represent the program professionally, including observing privacy/confidentiality, being on time, not being under the influence of drugs/alcohol, and following program and facility dress codes.

7. Veterinary & Health Requirements

- Maintain current vaccinations and other Valley Humane Society veterinary requirements.
- Complete the required annual veterinary examination and annual Ova & Parasites fecal test.
- Submit updated records and required paperwork before expiration.
- Maintain current flea prevention.
- Follow additional health requirements established by partner facilities.

- Rabies titer tests are not accepted as they do not meet the state requirements.

Dogs with expired or missing medical requirements will be placed on hold and may not participate until requirements are satisfied. Records not updated within 60 days may result in removal and may require re-certification before returning. Valley Humane Society may update veterinary requirements based on veterinary guidance, partner facility requirements, or applicable standards.

8. Training, Mentoring & Probation

- Attend orientation/training and pass the evaluation with the dog to be certified.
- Complete a minimum of two mentor shifts per area within two months unless additional mentoring is recommended.
- Some facilities may require three mentor shifts and/or an observation shift.
- Complete a three-month probationary follow-up/observation.
- Additional mentoring, coaching, or observation may be required whenever a team would benefit from additional support.

9. Scheduling, Participation & Facility Safety

- Volunteer at least twice per month unless on approved leave.
- Visit only approved facilities and participate only in approved activities.
- Follow scheduling procedures, communicate conflicts as soon as possible, and log hours monthly.
- Do not represent yourself or your dog as a Canine Comfort team at unapproved locations or activities.
- Follow all facility rules and current Valley Humane Society/facility health and safety requirements.
- Never allow the dog to eliminate indoors. Diapers and belly bands are not permitted as a substitute for house-training.
- Immediately notify appropriate staff of any incident, injury, bite, fall, or other safety concern.
- Do not use the Canine Comfort vest for non-approved activities such as shopping, eating, or personal travel.

Participation may be limited by facility capacity, team suitability, volunteer performance, or facility-specific requirements.

10. Concerns, Coaching, Holds & Re-evaluation

Valley Humane Society's goal is to identify concerns early and help teams succeed. Depending on the seriousness, frequency, circumstances, and whether a concern is corrected, the program may:

1. Provide coaching or feedback and document the concern.
2. Require additional mentoring or observation.
3. Limit or pause participation at a specific facility or place the team on temporary hold.
4. Require veterinary, grooming, behavioral, or other professional follow-up.
5. Require re-evaluation or additional training.
6. Determine whether continued participation is appropriate.

Examples include grooming or odor, barking/disruptive behavior, handler control, equipment violations, failure to follow facility requirements, medical records or health requirements, reliability or repeated missed commitments, unprofessional conduct, and failure to respond appropriately to reasonable coaching or repeated concerns.

A temporary hold from all Canine Comfort activities is a pause to ensure program standards are consistently met while working toward a resolution; it is not necessarily permanent or intended as a disciplinary action.

11. Program Removal

Valley Humane Society reserves the right to place a team on hold, restrict participation, require re-evaluation, or remove a team when the team does not meet program requirements, presents a safety or well-being concern, or is not an appropriate fit for pet-assisted therapy.

Serious concerns may require immediate removal from a visit or temporary hold, including aggression, significant loss of handler control, repeated barking, leaving a dog unattended, serious safety concerns, deliberate violations of program requirements, or repeated failure to correct documented concerns.

Reinstatement after a hold may require specified corrective actions, re-evaluation, additional mentoring, updated documentation, and/or attendance at a program update.

12. Volunteer Acknowledgment

I have read the Valley Humane Society Canine Comfort Pet-Assisted Therapy Guidelines & Requirements and understand that participation requires me to meet program requirements and visit standards.

- I am responsible for knowing and following current Canine Comfort requirements.
- My dog must meet grooming, behavior, health, and safety standards at every visit.
- I am expected to be receptive to reasonable coaching and feedback.
- Additional mentoring, observation, a temporary hold, re-evaluation, or removal may be required when concerns arise.
- Facility-specific requirements must also be followed.
- Requirements may be updated, and I am responsible for reviewing program communications.
- If/when I am no longer a Canine Comfort volunteer, I will retire my dog's vest and will not wear it again, as I will no longer be covered by Valley Humane Society's insurance and actions I take will not be supported by Valley Humane Society.

Volunteer Name: _____

Dog Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Program Representative: _____

Date: _____