

LEHIGHTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT THERAPY DOG HANDBOOK 2026-2027



Questions regarding this handbook may be directed to the Office of the Director of Student Services of the Lehigh Area School District at 610-377-4490.

Table of Contents

History of the Program.....	3
Primary Goal of the Program.....	3
Benefits.....	3
Public Access.....	4
Ownership.....	4
Services Provided by the Therapy Dog.....	4
Handling and Care.....	5
Administration/Liability Insurance/Funding.....	6
School Accommodations.....	6
Public/Visitors Accommodations.....	7
Orientation and Training for Secondary-Handlers.....	8

General Policy and Procedures

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found many teens reporting being overwhelmed or depressed because of their high stress levels. Overall, U.S. teenagers report feeling more stressed-out than adults do.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, four million children and adolescents in this country suffer from a serious mental disorder that causes significant functional impairments at home, at school and with peers. Of children ages 9 to 17, 21 percent have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder that causes at least minimal impairment.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth ages 15 to 24. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza and chronic lung disease combined. Over 90 percent of children and adolescents who commit suicide have a mental disorder.

Within the Lehigh Area School District, many students struggle with mild to severe forms of mental health concerns. While some students have been identified and provided services within the school and community, many go unidentified. After careful consideration of ways to reach all students, it was determined that a Therapy Dog would help to meet these goals through impacting students in three interconnected areas: improving mental health of students, providing social benefits that are unique to interactions with animals, and decreasing barriers to learning.

Based upon this information, the Lehigh Area School District, with the guidance of Firefly Farm Kennels LLC, implemented the therapy dog program at the start of the 2024-2025 school year, and have continued this reputable program.

PRIMARY GOAL OF THE PROGRAM

The Therapy Dog will be utilized with students and staff within the school setting, many of whom experience mental illness (ex. Anxiety & Depression), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Autism, English as a Second Language, Intellectual Difficulties, and more mild forms of mental health issues within the educational setting. The goal is to lessen their stress and anxiety during activities occurring during the school day. With decreased anxiety, students may be able to focus and engage in classes better, feel more comfortable to open up to counselors and teachers, and find comfort and connection within the school environment. This program will potentially improve overall feelings and allow for more effective progression through the learning process.

BENEFITS

Overall research has demonstrated that the use of animals used in Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) have had tremendous benefits when used in that modality. For the purpose of the school, however, the Therapy

Dog will be used for Animal Assisted Activities (AAA). Additional goals for the successful AAA visits include:

- Increase communication skills
- Foster trust
- Reduce anxiety and ease stress
- Reduce isolation and loneliness
- Allow for self-regulation
- Improve self-esteem and feelings of self-worth
- Improve socialization
- Increase attentiveness and engagement
- Acquire skills of acceptance and being non-judgmental
- Reduce inappropriate social behavior
- Improve physical and psychological well being
- Build kindness, compassion, and empathy in students

PUBLIC ACCESS

The Therapy Dog is not a service dog, in that he/she is not providing services to one particular person. As such, he/she has more limitations to public access than traditional service dogs. He/she has public access to the facility with which he/she is connected; that is the Lehigh Area School District. He/she may only access other public establishments if in training (i.e. to learn a new cue).

OWNERSHIP

The Primary Handlers are the owners of the Therapy Dog. The Lehigh Area School District will use the services of the Therapy Dog as a support for student mental health services, and claim no ownership of the Therapy Dog.

SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE THERAPY DOG

Scheduled classrooms within the school: The Therapy Dog will be utilized throughout the District and will maintain a schedule throughout the school day. Any teacher/staff member may request the presence of the Therapy Dog during an individual or group meeting/classroom session. However, the dog must be with a Primary or Secondary Handler. Within the classroom setting, the dog may be used simply as a calming presence or may be used to interact with students and assist with educational material. The dog will only be permitted to interact with those participants who feel comfortable, keeping in mind the possibility of fear and/or allergies.

Counseling/Nursing/special situations: The Therapy Dog will be best utilized with students/staff who are particularly withdrawn, depressed, and anxious or otherwise experiencing some heightened emotions.

With the dog's presence, the student may experience a decrease in stress levels which may allow the individual to remain calm, feel more at ease, and potentially be more willing to discuss issues and needs; this allows the staff member to better identify appropriate resources and solutions. For the safety of the Therapy Dog, he/she shall NOT be used in instances where an individual is currently in a state of escalation and aggression.

The Therapy Dog may be included as part of public sponsored events by Lehigh Area School District to raise awareness of mental health issues impacting children and teenagers. Through these events, it will show that the District is invested in not just educating students but is equally invested in addressing their mental health as well.

HANDLING AND CARE

Therapy Dog Team: A team consisting of administration and primary and secondary handlers will provide the framework for programming and scheduling that involves the Therapy Dog.

Certification/Handlers: Certified Therapy Dogs are bred for optimal temperament to work with children, in public settings and in facilities where stress levels run high. Lehigh Area School District has Primary Handlers and additional Secondary Handlers who accompany the dog to scheduled/requested classrooms and school settings. A Primary Handler is the owner of the Therapy Dog and Secondary Handlers are teachers/staff members interested in using the Therapy Dog as a tool within the classroom/school settings.

Training: The Primary Handlers must be trained and certified through an accredited training program to certify therapy dog handlers, and must be recertified according to the required recertification schedule. The Secondary Handlers will receive the required training toward certification.

Harness: The Therapy Dog should wear his/her harness, indicating the status as a working dog, and therapy patch any time he/she is working in public. The harness should be clean and well maintained.

Living Accommodations: The Therapy Dog will live with his/her Primary Handlers.

Therapy Dog program sustainability: If the district needs to secure a new Therapy Dog, the district administration, the school board, and the Therapy Dog team will reevaluate the need for a Therapy Dog as well as district and community resources to fund the Therapy Dog. If deemed appropriate, the Therapy Dog program will continue with the goal of obtaining a new Therapy Dog prior to the initial Therapy Dog's discontinuation to provide overlap of service.

Retirement: Retirement of the Lehigh Area School District Therapy Dog will be a joint decision between the primary veterinarian, LASD, and the Primary Handlers.

Health Care and General Maintenance: Veterinary care for the Therapy Dog will be provided by an accredited, licensed veterinarian or veterinary hospital or clinic. The Primary Handlers shall maintain the health of the dog with daily exercise and good nutrition.

ADMINISTRATION/LIABILITY INSURANCE FUNDING:

Liability insurance is covered by both the Primary Handlers and the Lehigh Area School District. The projected expenses, including training, supplies, veterinary and grooming costs, will be at Primary Handlers' expense with assistance from the Lehigh Area School District for District supplies.

Budget for Therapy Dog program: Costs for Therapy Dog related District supplies will be written into grants, as appropriate, and the district budget. Community partnership donations of additional supplies will be accepted.

SCHOOL ACCOMMODATIONS

1. Teachers and staff shall be trained on the proper use and purpose of the dog. This will include the potential for encountering the dog throughout their workday and proper behavior in the school while the dog is in "work" mode.
2. Teachers and staff shall be informed of the difference between "work" mode and "social" mode.
 - a. Work mode shall be indicated by the presence of the vest worn by the dog indicating its position as a Lehigh Area School District Therapy Dog. During this mode, personnel will be asked to check with the Handler before petting or interacting with the dog in order to assist in allowing the dog to focus on the job at hand.
 - b. Social mode shall be indicated by the absence of the vest. Social mode shall occur when the dog is not working. The Primary Handler, with assistance and coordination from the Secondary Handlers, shall ensure the dog has ample social times as well as work time throughout the workday.
 - During social mode, personnel will be encouraged to interact with the dog.
 - Due to the health and maintenance of the dog, personnel are asked to refrain from providing treats to the dog.
 - c. The Handler shall not allow the dog to enter any area where she is not welcome, including any "No Dog" zones.
 - d. The Handler shall not relinquish custody of the dog at any time during the workday to an individual except another Secondary Handler.
 - e. The dog shall not be permitted to have the run of the office or school during social mode.
3. If any personnel would like to provide a treat or toy for the Therapy Dog, request must be approved by the Primary Handler. Rawhides of any kind, barbecue bones, soft, latex squeaky toys, flimsy stuffed toys, rope toys, and frisbees are prohibited.
4. A crate and/or dog bed will be located in each of the District buildings at a place to be determined for use during off duty time. The Handlers will maintain the crate/bed for cleanliness and structural soundness. A secondary dog bed will be available to provide for an additional space for the dog to have down time.
5. The Therapy Dog will be fed in the morning prior to the work day; he/she will only require a water bowl in the Handlers' offices, maintained on trays to catch any spills. This will be available throughout the day to provide proper hydration to the dog. These bowls and trays shall be emptied and cleaned on a daily basis.

6. Toileting will be done by a trained Handler in grassy areas throughout the District determined by buildings and grounds; the Handler is required to clean up waste left by the dog and dispose of it properly. Other suitable and appropriate areas may be utilized as long as the area is cleaned up.
7. The Primary Handler will take the Therapy Dog for a walk on a daily basis.
8. The Primary Handler shall take proper hygienic measures to ensure the cleanliness of the dog in order to minimize any dander or residual hair that may be left by the dog and to maintain overall good health. This shall include:
 - a. On a daily basis: Brushing of the dog's coat to minimize shedding.
 - b. On a weekly basis: Brushing of the dog's teeth with toothbrush and paste formulated for dogs.
 - c. Three times a year: The Therapy Dog will be taken to the groomer for trimming of nails, deshedding and a thorough cleaning
 - d. On a monthly basis:
 - Shampooing of the dog with dander treating products.
 - Provide heartworm medication and flea and tick treatment.
 - f. Special pet wipes can also be utilized to refresh the dog's coat in between bathing.
9. A "No Dog Zone" area will be maintained. This will provide a room free of dog allergens for meetings or other functions.
10. The certified Handler's office and any other area frequented by the dog will be regularly vacuumed.
11. The Primary Handler shall utilize an accredited, licensed veterinarian or veterinary hospital or clinic to maintain proper hygiene of the dog as well as immunizations and any other health concern(s) related to the dog. Regular grooming can occur at any animal grooming facility.
12. A Google Calendar will be created to allow access and scheduling of the Lehigh Area School District Therapy Dog and all requests and reservations must have the approval of the Primary Handlers and administration.
13. The Primary Handlers and administration will have final authority regarding the use of the Lehigh Area School District Therapy Dog.
14. The Superintendent will be updated on the use of the Therapy Dog within the School District setting. They reserve the right to make final determinations regarding the proper use of the dog within the school setting. The certified Handlers shall adhere to all rules, policies and procedures set forth by the Superintendent and Assistant to the Superintendent.

PUBLIC/VISITORS ACCOMMODATIONS:

1. The certified Handlers will take appropriate actions to minimize contact with those who express their fear or show distress in the dog's presence.
2. In the event any party enters an area where the dog is present and has fear or expresses that he/she is allergic to the dog, the dog will be removed from the area.

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING-SECONDARY HANDLERS

Secondary Handlers may not take control of the Therapy Dog until they have completed the Orientation and Training and individual Public Access Test (#8 and #9 below) conducted by a Primary Handler or another designated party.