

MDS Alert

Policies and Protocols: Enact Rules for Personal, Live-in Pets, Too

Providing a space for residents to interact with their personal or family pets can make a huge difference, but your facility should figure out any liabilities in advance.

Jason Stull, VMD, MPVM, PhD, and Timothy Landers, PhD, RN, CNP, CIC, associate professors at **Ohio State University** in Columbus, Ohio, recommend that facilities put protocols in place for personal pets as well as facility-approved therapy animals.

Important: Try to be strict with the reason and scope of a visit by an individually owned pet. "During their visits the animal's purpose is to visit the designated resident only; this is not a facility planned activity," Stull and Landers say in a protocol template for Ohio nursing facilities, titled "Model Animal Protocols for Long-Term Care Facilities."

Subject the personally owned animal to most of the same "credentialing" your facility requires for therapy animals, including proof that the animal is up to date on all vaccinations, especially rabies, and a staff-evaluated observation of temperament.

"The animal must be approved by (staff position and/or internal committee member) before the animal enters the facility, which includes the following: i. A certificate must be provided with evidence that the animal is up to date on rabies vaccination (cats, dogs, ferrets). ii. The animal must undergo a brief temperament test and inspection by (staff position) to ensure animal appears healthy," Stull and Landers say.

However, Stull and Landers recommend not giving staff special privileges to interact with a personally owned pet, especially when other residents are prohibited from interacting.

If your facility allows residents to bring their own pets into a live-in situation, your facility should really double-down on upholding protocols. Beyond the health concerns, including requiring proof of regular and consistent vaccination, grooming, a flea/tick prevention program, spay or neutering, and meeting the appropriate age and temperament designations, your facility should have rules about what behavior is OK and safe, and how to remove an animal that doesn't meet those standards.

Craft clear and distinct rules for caring for animal waste, including who walks dogs when, who cleans litterboxes when, and who is responsible for cleaning up any accidents (and which cleaning products they should use). Even if the animal in question belongs to a resident, assign a staff member to be "in charge" of cleaning protocols.

Stull and Landers provide the following recommendations for dealing with animal waste:

"It is important to pick up the animal's feces regularly, whether it is in the yard, litter box, cage or aquarium. Litter boxes should be scooped out once per day. Also, the entire litter box needs to be emptied, cleaned and disinfected with scalding water and bleach (1 part bleach: 32 parts water) at least every several weeks. While cleaning the litter box the disinfectant needs to be left on the box for at least 10 minutes, or as indicated by the manufacturer, rinsed and left to dry. NEVER clean a litter box in a kitchen or bathroom sink. Like cats, birds need their cages cleaned regularly because bird droppings can cause breathing issues in immunocompromised individuals. Dog's feces need to be removed from the yard immediately because some pathogens that are present in dog stool can live in the environment for a long time and can infect humans and other animals. The stool should be picked up with a bag or scooper and disposed of in a trashcan. Remember to clean your hands thoroughly after handling animal feces and urine."

Don't forget that live-in animals will need veterinary care at some point. If your facility allows residents to have their own pets live at the facility, make sure the facility and the resident know who is responsible for transportation in the event of

regular or emergency veterinary care. If your facility owns the animals, designate a staff person and a backup staff person to facilitate any veterinary care.

Important: If your facility is home to animals, incorporate them into any and all emergency preparedness plans, as well, and make sure all staff know how and where to make sure any pets are safe, where to transport them in the event of evacuation, and how to care for a scared or traumatized animal during an emergency.