

BEST VISITING PRACTICES

Have you ever had to take any “Continuing Education” or “Refresher” courses during the course of your career? When I visited at a local hospital with my dog, every year we hospital volunteers had to take an online refresher course concerning compliance, HIPAA, and disaster preparedness. Consider this article a necessary refresher course for visiting with your dog!

As Canines for Christ therapy dog teams, it is imperative that we represent Christ and C4C in the best way and as professionally as possible. Mistakes, lapses in judgement, and carelessness on our part can have serious consequences resulting in such things as injuries to those we visit, harm to our dogs, being asked not to return to a particular facility, or overstressing our dogs.

The Volunteer Manual (especially pgs 4-7) describes many good and necessary visit practices. I encourage every member to reread the Manual periodically, at least once every year – We all need reminders occasionally! This article contains some helpful practices which reinforce and build on those mentioned in the Manual.

Before the visit:

First, make sure your dog is up-to-date on their vet visits and vaccinations (especially rabies). You should bring with you to each visit: poop bags; water for your dog; treats; hand sanitizer; wipes; some paper towels (to clean up messes, drool, etc.); 4-6 foot leash preferably with a traffic handle for better control of the dog in navigating small spaces – no chain or retractable leashes; collar (flat, Martingale, or harness) – no prong, slip chain, or electronic collars; C4C proof of insurance; rabies vaccination certificate; disinfectant dog-safe wipes for your dog’s paws (particularly necessary in a hospital or nursing home environment) and for wiping down its body after being petted by many hands; phone; ministry cards; and a pen & small notepad for prayer requests & notes. A side note: If we visited a place where we would see the same residents on recurring visits, I would write down their first names and try to memorize them so I could call them by name on the following visit. Names are important! Calling a person by name makes the visit much more personal. People were always touched that I could remember their name – It always brought a higher level of caring to the visit.

Make sure your dog was recently bathed and brushed prior to the visit. Your dog should also have clean teeth, ears, and trimmed nails.

Plan to arrive at the facility 10-15 minutes early. This gives your dog the chance to relieve itself before the visit (always do this in an out-of-the-way location, never near the facility entrance, and clean up after your dog.) Getting there early also gives your dog time to acclimate to the environment, and most importantly, gives you time to pray before the visit! When visiting with a group of teams, take a few minutes to pray as a group before visiting.

During the visit:

When going room to room, don't disturb anyone who is sleeping, on the phone, or with a staff member. Always ask before you enter a room with your dog. Some people don't want a visit; some people are afraid of dogs; some people are from a culture where dogs are viewed as "unclean". Always respect their boundaries – Don't try to change people's minds, even if you think their reasons for refusal are unfounded. Also, don't discuss people's specific health issues. Respect their confidentiality and never post photos of their faces or other identifying details without their permission and permission from the facility.

Dogs must remain on a leash during the entire visit with the handler always holding the leash. A dog must never be allowed to be off leash (unless approved by the C4C Director of Membership). The handler should never leave their dog under anyone else's control, other than another C4C member. When walking down a corridor, walk with your dog on your right side, next to the wall. Dogs should always be on a loose leash. Handlers should maintain a three-foot distance between their own and other dogs. Dogs should not interact with each other during visits.

When positioning your dog in relation to the person, line up your dog to the side of the person whenever possible, whether the person is in a wheelchair or in bed. Dogs should never be allowed to jump up on anyone, nor should their paws ever be on a person's lap or bed. Remember that some people's skin is thin and fragile and paws up on a lap can cause bruising or scratches. Keep all four paws on the floor (unless there is an empty chair next to the person that the dog can put its paws on for easier petting). Only small dogs are allowed on a person's bed, and only with permission from the person, and only if you use a clean towel to place your dog on as a barrier. Make sure you do not place your dog on any tubes that might be hiding under the sheets. Don't allow your dog to lick people, even if they ask for "dog kisses" – it's unsanitary and potentially dangerous, because some dogs regard close face-to-face contact as a threat. Barking is never allowed.

Always remain aware of your dog. Always be attentive to your dog. Anticipate your dog's behavior and direct your dog accordingly. Encourage your dog by praising good behavior, redirecting inappropriate behavior, and doing everything you can to help your dog succeed in its tasks. If my dog got distracted during a visit, I would get him to focus on me with the command "Watch Me". If he was anxious, fearful, or stressed, I would always talk to him in a quiet voice and use a soothing, calm, and reassuring tone. Your dog will always take their cue from you and your tone of voice. On occasion, people might touch or pet your dog in ways your dog doesn't prefer (too fast, too rough, or the wrong place on his body, for example). Don't hesitate to tell them how your dog likes to be petted ("He REALLY likes it when you scratch under his collar", for instance.) Sometimes people just need a little guidance and are all too happy to oblige!

As you interact with those you visit, be a good listener. It is often more helpful for people to talk to you or your dog than to hear you talk to them! Be willing to take a back seat to your dog's interaction with the person and allow intimacy to develop between the person and your dog. Humbly remember that your job, via your dog, is to assist people in the often slow and personal task of healing.

Potential hazards to watch out for:

There are a variety of common hazards of visiting which you will need to be vigilant about preventing. One of the things I have always looked for was my dog's tail. When my dog was sitting, his tail was lying on the floor and always subject to being stepped on or run over by a wheelchair. So, watch your dog's tail and reposition it if necessary to prevent any injury.

Also be on guard against people bumping into or tripping over your dog. Use your body as a barrier to protect your dog. Keep enough space between your dog and people who are moving around.

Another hazard is your dog scratching someone either by being too rambunctious or even just "shaking hands". Many people would ask my dog to "shake". I never allowed this on visits, especially with the elderly or small children. Instead, I taught my dog to "Wave" – it's the same motion as shaking, but this trick doesn't require any contact.

In order to avoid your dog's teeth coming into contact with someone's skin, you should never allow participants to give your dog a treat on visits. My own dog always took a treat like a shark, plus he would get overly excited by treats and lose focus on those he was supposed to interact with. So I waited until the end of the visit to give him treats myself.

Be especially watchful of things on the floor that might harm your dog if he ingests them (pills, syringes, harmful food, etc.). Make sure your dog is rock-solid on the "Leave It" command.

One common hazard while visiting is allowing your dog to be cornered by a group of people with no escape route. When my dog and I would visit a university or high school where groups of students would all come in at once to pet him, I would usually set a limit on the number of people that could sit and interact with him at any one time. And I never set him up in a corner to do this, because I wanted to ensure he felt the freedom to leave at any time if he wanted to.

Final Thoughts:

Please always prioritize your dog's physical and emotional well-being while doing this ministry! Understand and respect your dog's limits and preferences. Never force your dog to interact or do something it refuses to do. Know when it is best to remove your dog from any situation in which it is showing signs of stress, or else know how to relieve your dog's stress promptly. Recognize the signs of fatigue in your dog. Don't schedule visits too often – you should schedule no more than 1-2 visits per week, each lasting for no longer than 1 to 1-1/2 hours, and never two visits in the same day, or visits on two days in a row. Your dog needs a day in between visits to relax and regroup. Protecting your dog from undue stress increases your dog's confidence and trust in you and will ensure that your dog will be around for the long haul to love on many more people in the name of Jesus!