

## 2026 Pet Partners Evaluation Changes

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- **May 26, 2026**
- **Knowledge**

### Description

Frequently asked questions related to expanded evaluation pathways announced in 2026.

### Content

What evaluation options are available?

There are two evaluation pathways:

- **Traditional Evaluation** – conducted at scheduled events by Pet Partners Licensed Team Evaluators (TEs)
- **Alternate Evaluation** - coordinated directly between a handler and a qualified Alternate Evaluator with a background in animal behavior, health, or training.

### Why offer two pathways?

We value every evaluation conducted by TEs. Those efforts matter to teams, to Pet Partners, and to the people receiving visits.

However, some prospective teams cannot easily access a Pet Partners evaluation. When that happens, they often choose a different therapy animal organization because it is easier to schedule and does not require re-evaluation.

By offering two pathways, we can make evaluations more accessible. This allows more teams to enter our program that holds higher standards for education and re-evaluation over time. This is better for animals, for safety and for the overall reputation of therapy animal volunteerism.

### Are the pathways equivalent?

Yes.

Both pathways use the same core evaluation criteria. Teams are registered the same way, regardless of which pathway they take.

Accessibility does not mean the evaluation is easier. The Traditional Evaluation scoresheet uses terminology and structure that may not be familiar to professionals outside of Pet

Partners. Updating the structure and language improves clarity without changing the priorities of the evaluation or the expected outcomes.

### **Are both types of evaluations allowed for new and renewing teams?**

Yes!

### **What is the same between the two evaluation types?**

Both evaluation types:

- Assess the same handler and animal behaviors
- Emphasize affiliative animals (those that seek out interaction) and proactive, supportive handling
- Prioritize animal welfare and safety
- Are conducted by qualified individuals

### **What is different between the two evaluation types?**

The Alternate Evaluation may take place in less structured environments, include exercises in a modified sequence, and involve members of the public rather than formal evaluation assistants. This approach is intended to expand evaluation access and reflect shifts in animal-assisted interventions, which are emphasizing natural interactions and observational assessment more. At the same time, Pet Partners maintains that the Traditional Evaluation continues to provide an appropriate level of visit simulation to meet current standards.

**Key differences include:**

- The Alternate Evaluation does not use formal evaluation assistants, though others may still be involved.
- Exercise order may be adjusted in the Alternate Evaluation.
- Evaluation environment is more flexible in the Alternate Evaluation and may be used in facilities or public and outdoor spaces.
- Alternate Evaluators may provide an environmental recommendation of predictable or complex, but these are not tied to specific exercises.
- Familiarity is not tracked on the scoresheet in the Alternate Evaluation.

## **Why were these differences necessary? Why not have animal experts deliver the Traditional Evaluation?**

Some updates reflect how the field is changing, including acceptance of more flexible, natural observation of animal behavior alongside structured approaches. Other adjustments were made to improve clarity for qualified evaluators who are not already familiar with Pet Partners-specific terminology.

## **How are these evaluation types scheduled and offered?**

Traditional Evaluations are the evaluations most familiar to our volunteers.

### **Traditional Evaluations:**

- Include multiple teams and structured scheduling
- Are listed on the Pet Partners calendar
- Are held on set dates at specific testing locations

### **Alternate Evaluations can be:**

- Offered by a TE who is contacted by a prospective or renewing handler. These TEs may be unable to secure an evaluation location or assistants on a regular basis; offering the Alternate Evaluation allows them to continue to serve teams. These events are not listed on the Pet Partners calendar.
- Delivered by a TE who prefers the Alt Eval scoresheet and structure but still scheduled using the Pet Partners calendar.
- Arranged individually by a handler with an Alternate Evaluator in their area (e.g., a certified dog trainer, veterinarian, or other species expert).
- On a limited basis during the 2026 pilot phase, the Alternate Evaluation may be offered by a certified dog trainer to their clientele, often as part of a structured dog training course.

Please see the FAQ section below for more guidance on licensed TEs offering the Alternate Evaluation.

## **Are handlers still encouraged to attend Traditional Evaluations?**

Yes!

Traditional Evaluations offer a structured introduction to the Pet Partners community and are typically the lower-cost option. Traditional Evaluations are designed for volunteers, by

volunteers, and handlers will continue to be directed to the evaluation calendar and Team Evaluator directory.

Handlers can choose the pathway that best fits their situation. In some cases, there may be limited availability on the evaluation calendar, they may need to be evaluated sooner than what's offered or may have travel considerations that make scheduled events less practical.

While Pet Partners materials will promote the calendar and directory, some new handlers may move quickly through the registration process and select the Alternate Evaluation without fully exploring available Traditional Evaluation options.

### **How much do evaluations cost?**

TEs offer low or no cost evaluations as a volunteer. Volunteer status is critical for insurance coverage during evaluations – whether a TE is offering the Traditional or Alternate Evaluation. Some TEs may collect a fee to cover any direct costs associated with the evaluation.

**Alternate Evaluations offered by professionals in the training or behavior space** may charge an hourly rate or session fee as part of their employment or business. These individuals are covered by their own insurance when conducting evaluations, as they are not eligible for Pet Partners' volunteer-based insurance.

**I am concerned that certified dog trainers and other animal-related professionals will create lower-quality teams because they don't understand Pet Partners. I am particularly concerned that they are incentivized to pass their own paying clients.**

Certified dog trainers and other animal-related professionals bring strong expertise in animal behavior, temperament, and handling. Like many professions, they are expected to follow established codes of conduct that emphasize animal welfare, safety, and objectivity. This includes:

- Prioritizing the well-being of the animal
- Assessing risk to both the animal and the public
- Evaluating behavior based on what is directly observed rather than personal relationships
- Acting with integrity and accountability
- Understanding the importance of handler competencies in any human-dog duo

**I am a Community Partner member. Typically, all teams in our group are evaluated by our own TEs, and I am worried about having teams enter our group from two different evaluation pathways.**

Community Partners that regularly host evaluations and maintain public availability on the calendar may see fewer teams enter through alternate pathways. Still, teams who enter through an Alternate Evaluator should be welcomed the same as any other team.

Community Partner membership requirements should apply consistently to all teams. If a team does not seem ready to volunteer (based on documented incidents or concerns that should be shared with Pet Partners staff), or does not meet local requirements such as dues, Community Partners are not obligated to maintain that team's membership. This should be applied consistently, regardless of evaluation pathway.

**Historically, Pet Partners has discouraged dog trainers from evaluating due to issues of familiarity and insurance provisions. What has changed?**

Pet Partners has allowed Alternate Evaluators (certified dog trainers and other qualified animal care or behavior specialists) to perform evaluations under certain circumstances. These include when there was no evaluator nearby or when the evaluator did not feel comfortable assessing a species with which they were unfamiliar, i.e. veterinarians have commonly evaluated pocket pets.

Pet Partners' previous concerns about evaluator familiarity have been addressed in recent years by experts in animal training. Certified dog trainers are held to high professional standards around assessing temperament and behavior and we have evolved to understand that those standards include unbiased judgment. Moreover, certified dog trainers have a vested interest in ensuring animals they train are viewed safely and positively by the community; they would not be motivated to pass a team who is not ready for therapy animal visits.

**If Pet Partners' approach to familiarity has changed, does that apply to licensed Pet Partners volunteer evaluators as well?**

Yes, and program materials are changing to reflect this. As a volunteer who often interacts with other volunteers on a personal basis, it is important for TEs to assess their own bias and decline evaluating in situations where a close personal relationship exists. However, we recognized that seasoned TEs have such breadth and depth of experience that, like an Alternate Evaluator, they may be able to approach many teams with an unbiased lens.

**I noticed that the Alternate Evaluation has "Environmental Recommendations" rather than a rating. Tell me more about that.**

In the Traditional Evaluation, teams receive a Predictable or Complex rating. The Alternate Evaluation uses Environmental Recommendations instead.

Ratings and recommendations coexist at this time, allowing all teams, regardless of evaluation pathway, to receive guidance that aligns to Predictable or Complex environments.

### **Can animal trainers, behaviorists and veterinarians receive payment for the Alternate Evaluation?**

Yes. These Alternate Evaluators may be paid as part of their existing services and use their own professional insurance while conducting evaluations.

Regardless of the type of evaluation they hold, TEs may not receive payment for their time because **Pet Partners insurance applies only to volunteer services**. As always, TEs may collect fees to cover direct evaluation-related costs, such as room rental or equipment.

### **How are scoresheets submitted?**

The Traditional Evaluation, when scheduled on the Pet Partners calendar, is scored via the calendar. Nothing changes.

The Alternate Evaluation is submitted via a **QR code** that is displayed at the bottom of the scoresheet. When that code is scanned, a simple form displays that allows the evaluator to enter their name, the team's name, and team's assessment. Evaluators who are unable to use **QR codes** can simply email the evaluation scores to [contact@petpartners.org](mailto:contact@petpartners.org)

Results from both evaluation types will always be reviewed by staff.

### **How should evaluators talk about the Alternate Evaluation?**

The Alternate Evaluation is an equal, valid pathway - not a lesser or backup option.

### **What does this mean for evaluators?**

TEs remain central to the program and will continue to offer the majority of Pet Partners evaluations. The addition of the Alternate Evaluation increases access while maintaining the same core evaluation approach.

### **Where can I view the Alternate Evaluation materials?**

They are [available](#) in the resource library.

## **What does this mean for instructors?**

Some minor changes were made to the deck and slides to reflect the broader evaluation options, as well as the very small shifts around familiarity and environmental recommendations and ratings. However, handlers who attend workshops are more likely to receive a Traditional Evaluation for two reasons:

1. Almost always, if there's an active Instructor in your area, there's an active TE and handlers flow right from workshop to evaluation.
2. Handlers who appreciate the connectedness and depth of an in-person workshop also likely prefer an evaluation from a Pet Partners volunteer.

## **Licensed Pet Partners Evaluators: Offering the Alternate Evaluation**

**I am interested in conducting the Alternate Evaluation as a licensed Pet Partners Team Evaluator. How would I use it?**

The Alternate Evaluation can be applied in a variety of ways and settings. For example:

- A handler may contact you but can't attend a scheduled evaluation due to a conflict or because the event is full. In these cases, you can conduct a one-on-one Alternate Evaluation in a local park, a dog-friendly business, or your usual evaluation space. When evaluations are arranged privately, they do not need to be scheduled through the Pet Partners calendar.
- If you have access to facilities where teams regularly visit, you can conduct Alternate Evaluations for renewing teams during their volunteer work. Many required exercises occur naturally in these environments. For instance, a team approaching a busy nurse's station can fulfill the Crowded Petting exercise. Any components not observed organically can be incorporated, like asking a handler to have their dog sit while you walk through a lobby or hallway.
- You may also schedule evaluations through the Pet Partners calendar as usual but choose to use the Alternate Evaluation scoresheet instead. If you take this approach, be sure to review the scoresheet requirements carefully and plan your evaluation space accordingly.

**If I conduct the Alternate Evaluation during a therapy animal visit, and the team exhibits a Not Appropriate or Not Ready behavior, what do I do?**

When conducting an Alternate Evaluation during a therapy animal visit, evaluators must be able to distinguish between minor policy violations and situations that may compromise safety.

If a policy violation occurs due to handler misunderstanding or a one-time error, and it does not directly impact client safety, you may continue the evaluation, if the handler demonstrates understanding and accepts corrective feedback. If the team ultimately passes, document the violation during score submission. Program staff will follow up with the handler as needed.

If a policy violation affects client safety, the evaluation should be stopped immediately, the team should end the visit, and a Not Ready score should be assigned. A Not Ready score must also be given if the handler does not demonstrate understanding of the violation or is unwilling to accept and apply corrective feedback, even if the original issue did not directly impact client safety.

If the animal shows any concerning behavior, such as signs of excessive stress or inappropriate vocalization, the evaluation must be stopped right away, and the team should leave the facility. In these cases, the team will need to complete a re-evaluation before participating in future visits.

**Can I perform the Alternate Evaluation at facilities for prospective new teams?**

Yes, but only under controlled conditions. Evaluations for prospective teams may be conducted within a facility if they take place in a private, controlled setting such as a conference room. They should not involve patients, clients, or students.

**These teams are not covered by Pet Partners insurance because they're not yet registered. Allowing interaction with patients, clients, or students creates unnecessary risk for all involved, including the handler and the facility.**