

Is your pooch meant for bigger things? Get Fido tested.

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One job that therapy dogs take on is as a "listener" in young-reader programs, such as this one at the Russell Memorial Library in 2009. (Preston Gannaway | The Virginian-Pilot)

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By [Eric Feber](#)
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Does your dog have what it takes to provide companionship and succor to the elderly? Can it act as a confidant to troubled youth or a confidence builder to struggling young readers? Can it calm those troubled with dementia, serious diseases or loneliness?

Jean Nohle, a therapy dog evaluator, will help local dog owners get those answers at two upcoming test sessions.

Those who live in the western part of the city might want to attend the 7 p.m. July 21 meeting of the Suffolk Humane Society at the Magnolia Ruritan Club. For those in eastern sections, the next test session is 1:30 p.m. Aug. 28 at Park Avenue Pups in South Norfolk.

The 13-part tests take about an hour, including official paperwork.

"It will be very involved, and they'll even be tested around hospital equipment," said Nohle, the head of the Peninsula therapy dogs program.

The former lawyer has handled therapy dogs for 14 years and has been a trained and registered evaluator for the past dozen.

"They must pass all parts. Every part of the test is there for a reason. We must be sure the dog can be reliable in any situation. They must come when called and must obey any command to 'leave it,' a command that could save the dog's life."

Nohle said the test will include having the dog ignore food temptations, touching a dog's ears, brushing down its back, having it shake hands and

obey basic commands.

"We can't have dogs that jump, cower or get behind cover," said Nohle. "They have to know to stay and come on command. They can't be nervous around people or other dogs and they must tolerate any kind of noise."

Nohle said therapy dogs must exhibit the patience of Job, have a friendly/nurturing disposition, safely maneuver around walkers, wheelchairs and hospital equipment and behave even when away from their handler.

"If you think your dog can pass this test, then sign them up," she said. "If not, work with your dog on any specific area and try again at a later date."

The benefit of therapy dogs has long been a proven fact, she added.

"They provide a calming presence," said Nohle, who helped start the K9 Kandy Strippers program at Sentara Obici Hospital in Suffolk. "They help patients, families and facility employees. They are known to lower one's blood pressure and regulate one's heart beat. Even our regional jail has a therapy dog program."

Therapy dogs are also used for young-reader programs.

"Schools and libraries use these programs, which have been found to be very effective," she said. "The dog provides a nonjudgmental, non-critical loving presence, putting the youngster at ease and encouraging the child to excel at reading."

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