



AAAIP

Association of Animal-Assisted
Intervention Professionals

AAAIP Certified Assessor Expectations & Guidelines



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Introduction

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) are a powerful way to enhance human health and well-being. Therapy and facility animals are being incorporated into a wide range of health and human services from mental health counseling to memory care, physical therapy to elementary school classrooms. To keep these interactions professional and safe for both the people and animals involved, there is a need for a corps of specially trained assessors, those with a knowledge of dog behavior who can evaluate how someone handles their animal while also interacting with people in a vocational or therapeutic setting. If you desire to specialize in therapy/facility animal training and want to empower the unbelievable value therapy animal bring to your community, we hope you'll consider becoming an AAAIP Certified Assessor.

The purpose of this document is to orient prospective assessors to the AAAIP therapy animal team assessment. If you decide to pursue your certification as an assessor for AAAIP, the first step is to complete an application and knowledge exam online before gaining access to the full materials and processes for the assessment. You can learn more about that process through our *Candidate Handbook*.

If you have further questions or need assistance, please contact support@aaaiponline.org.

Therapy Animal Team Competencies

The role of the AAAIP assessor is to conduct an independent evaluation of handlers and their therapy animals who work in professional settings. The assessment you conduct is based on AAAIP's Therapy Animal Team Competencies. These competencies were developed by a team of 10 subject matter experts consisting of dog trainers, animal behaviorists, veterinarians, service dog trainers, allied health professionals with AAI expertise, and current therapy animal team evaluators.

A draft of skills statements for both the animal and the handler was created. Then these skills statements were empirically validated by surveying 200 animal-assisted intervention (AAI) stakeholders, 96% of whom had direct experience handling therapy animals and 71% of whom had practical experience evaluating therapy animals in some capacity.

Your observations of therapy animal teams will tie back to these competencies covering both handler behavior and animal behavior. The full competencies can be found [here](#).

Expectations and Culture

Animal Welfare and Well-being

AAAIP grounds all its work in a philosophy that prioritizes animal welfare and well-being. You'll see this reflected throughout the Team Competencies and, by extension, the rubric used during assessments. Therapy animals should be allowed choice in interactions; coercion or physical intimidation of a therapy animal is considered unacceptable handler behavior.

When conducting the AAAIP therapy animal team assessment the expectation is that you will support the concepts of animal welfare and well-being as well as force-free training approaches. Both should be balanced with respecting the handler's goals for incorporating AAI into their profession.

Professionalism, not Perfectionism

Many interactions with therapy animals are more fluid in nature. This is in part due to the emphasis on allowing the animal choice during sessions as well as the practitioner's need to be responsive to their client in real time. It's critical to understand that therapy animals are not expected to act with the same level of precision as dogs participating in obedience trials, for example. Instead, you are seeking to assess the overall safety and professionalism of a team.

You'll be looking for signs that the handler can engage well with the client and also handle their therapy animal with awareness and appropriate interactions. Similarly, it's as important that you see evidence that the therapy animal has a connection with their handler as it is that the handler demonstrates appropriate skills. Skill competency can manifest in a variety of ways and no two teams you assess will look identical.

Confidentiality

The nature of the assessment is observing the therapy animal team in the setting where they interact with clients. All assessments should be treated with strict confidentiality. This includes not just the assessment and assessment outcomes, but any information regarding the client you observe, including

but not limited to, personally identifying information. Confidentiality requirements differ within the professions in which AAI is commonly incorporated, and assessors might be asked to follow additional confidentiality guidelines by the professionals they evaluate depending on the setting.

Honesty and Integrity

As an assessor certified by AAAIP, you will represent AAAIP and your activities reflect on the professionalism of both the organization and the growing field of AAI. The expectation, as outlined in the [assessor program agreement](#), is that you act with honesty and integrity in all matters including, but not limited to, how you represent your qualifications, how you market your assessment services, and the observations made and recorded for each assessment you conduct.

Conducting the Assessment

The following is an overview of how AAAIP therapy animal team assessments will be conducted. Upon completing your certification, you'll be able to access the complete assessment materials including a scoring rubric. ***The following is intended as a high-level overview and is not inclusive of the full assessment procedure.***

Who

- This assessment is designed for professional handler-animal teams. You aren't evaluating just the animal or just the handler, but how they work together. If a therapy animal works in a setting with multiple handlers, each handler-animal pair seeking certification would need their own, unique assessment.
- The assessment assumes the handler is a professional practitioner incorporating therapy animals into their paid work. Individuals interested in volunteering in their community should be directed to AAAIP's sister organization, [Pet Partners](#).
- While assessors are certified through AAAIP and teams with successful assessment outcomes may also be certified through AAAIP, handlers are not required to be AAAIP members in order to participate in an assessment. Similarly, assessors are not required to be AAAIP members, although AAAIP members enjoy a [substantial discount](#) on the cost of certification.
- All materials are currently designed for assessments of canine teams. If you are approached about a therapy animal team assessment for another species, please contact us.
- There are no restrictions against assessing a handler-animal team who you may have worked with in a different client capacity, such as dog training, as long as the protocols for the assessment are still followed completely.
- It's possible you might be assessing a team with years of experience working together. You may also have the opportunity to assess a relatively new team.

What

- The AAAIP assessment is the requirement each handler-animal team needs in order to apply to become a Certified Professional Therapy Animal Team through AAAIP.

- It is only to be used for this purpose and is not transferrable to other programs, unless explicitly recognized by AAAIP. If you are aware that this assessment is intended to meet a requirement other than the Certified Therapy Animal Team credential through AAAIP, it is your responsibility to adequately inform the handler and decline to assess them. Keep in mind, the assessor *program agreement* stipulates that you maintain confidentiality and security of the assessment procedures and failing to do so could result in your certification being revoked.

When & Where

- The assessment is designed to be the shadowing of a typical therapy animal interaction in the setting where the team will be working. For example, an occupational therapist would invite you to observe a real or mock session in the clinic where they work. Assessments may not be held in arbitrary public spaces such as big box stores or garden centers because that is not representative of the team's working environment or their clientele.
- You should work with the handler to establish a mutually acceptable date and time for the observation. Most observations can be completed in an hour or less.

Why

- There are different reasons someone may pursue an assessment and subsequent Professional Therapy Animal Team Certification:
 - A Practitioner needs it to obtain insurance for their AAI activities.
 - A handler is interested in feedback from someone who can view the interactions objectively, whether with a new animal, in a new setting, or with an aging animal whose retirement is being contemplated.
 - It's considered best practice in the field for all therapy animal teams to complete a third-party assessment on a regular basis.
- Your assessment and the subsequent team certification are not equivalent to permission to practice AAI. Instead, you're a handler's partner in helping them recognize areas of strength and growth.

How

- Observe the team in a setting that is consistent with their working environment and typical clientele. For example:
 - A school counselor who brings her therapy dog to school with her might invite you to shadow them during an existing group session that meets to practice strategies about overcoming testing anxiety.
 - A mental health counselor may not be able to have you shadow a session with an existing client due to confidentiality and sensitive topics but could arrange for a session with a colleague's spouse where they do a typical first session meet and greet with the therapy animal.
- As long as the 'client' is similar to real clients that counselor works with, an orchestrated session is acceptable.
- You will be using a rubric throughout your observation, noting when you see a skill successfully executed. While you may conversationally interact with the handler, you should not attempt to

create scenarios forcing skills to occur in a particular way or order. For example, you will not say: “Please show me that your dog knows how to sit and down.”

- Because the observation is organic and not scripted, you may not be able to observe every skill listed on the rubric. Your goal is to spend enough time with the team being assessed so that you can see the majority of the skills either attempted or achieved. No two assessments will ever look the same, even for the same handler animal team.

Assessment Outcomes

Using the Assessment Rubric

AAAIP will provide an assessment rubric template to AAAIP Certified Assessors to use for all observations. This rubric aligns with the Therapy Animal Team Competencies and provides an opportunity to document the handler and animal skills you observe. Assessors may take their notes electronically or on paper, as long as the rubric is used. The handler must receive a copy of the scored rubric at the end of the assessment.

Record Keeping

As the AAAIP Certified Assessor, you will be responsible for the required documentation and record keeping of every assessment conducted, regardless of the outcome. This includes:

- Providing a copy of the scored rubric to the team you just assessed, which includes the final attestation which they will submit for certification.
- Maintaining a record of the assessment outcomes for your long-term records.
- Logging the assessment with AAAIP using an online form.

When a Team Does Not Pass their Assessment

Assessments are snapshots in time. We acknowledge that, like people, animals can have a bad day and that one assessment does not disqualify a team from AAI. If you are unable to pass a team after completing an observation, be sure that any notes on the rubric clearly indicate how skills were not met so that teams may work on those skills. Teams who do not successfully pass their assessment may attempt again.

Per the [assessor program agreement](#), even after observing a team, you should never provide advice or recommendations in areas of veterinary medicine, animal behavior, or human and/or mental health services unless you are qualified to do so. However, as an assessor, you may refer handlers to a veterinary or behavior consulting professional, if asked.

Logistics

What You Can Change

You may, as a trainer or behaviorist, already have an established hourly rate. It’s appropriate to continue to use that rate to calculate the fee you will charge for assessments. Similarly, if significant travel is

involved to get to the assessment site, you may consider charging a standard mileage reimbursement rate.

Per the [program agreement](#), it is your responsibility to fully disclose to the handler in writing in advance your fee for the assessment, obtaining the handler's written agreement about the fee, and not change or supplement your fee in connection with the assessment without adequate communication.

Marketing Support

AAAIP Certified Assessors may use the accompanying logo and mark in their own marketing, consistent with the terms set forth in the [Candidate Handbook](#). Additionally, once you have earned your certification, we will provide you with materials you can use to market your ability to provide assessments and certifications.

Insurance Requirements

Unlike volunteer programs, AAAIP does not provide insurance to assessors who are paid professionals. AAAIP requires all assessors to carry liability insurance coverage with at least \$100,000 policy limits that includes coverage for claims related to assessment activities. It is your responsibility to understand your own policy coverage and ensure it meets this requirement. If you are seeking insurance, AAAIP recommends our partners at [Business Insurers of the Carolinas](#).

Maintaining Your Certification

In order to conduct AAAIP assessments, your certification must be in good standing. Plagiarism, infringement of copyright, or theft of the AAAIP assessment rubric including support materials will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Renewals are required every two years and are completed online using [Prolydian](#). The requirement to renew is a minimum activity level as demonstrated by the assessment log that is submitted online after each assessment. There are no other continuing education requirements. More details about renewal are available in the [Candidate Handbook](#).

Complaints against assessors or evidence of failure to uphold the program agreement can result in revocation of your certification. More information is available in the [Candidate Handbook](#).

