

Pet sitters can keep Fido comfy at home

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By RUTH BASHINSKY. Special to Newsday



Photo credit: Michael E. Ach | After a walk James Garfinkel gets a kiss from Sushi, the Bichon. (May 6, 2011)

Mary Gnieser is the first to admit that taking a family vacation can be quite an ordeal.

Last February, when the social worker and mother of two from Dix Hills learned that the kennel she normally uses had lost the reservation made months earlier for her family's other five members -- two dogs, two cats and a parrot -- the stress ratcheted up.

"We were leaving for our trip within a week," says Gnieser, 47. "I was beside myself."

A friend told her about a pet-care service that makes house calls so the animals can stay in their own home -- now she can't imagine it any other way.

"Our lives are so much easier now," says Gnieser, who enlisted Pat Passos, of Fetch! Pet Care, to look after her animals for the week. "She visits as many times as I'd like and all my pets are so happy, even my parrot, who can sometimes be a crank."

In-home pet-sitting is just one option for those who need someone to care for their animals when they're out of town. There are more than two dozen businesses on Long Island that offer such services, according to the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters.

HOW IT WORKS

Professional sitters are paid for each visit made to the home, where they typically spend 15 to 30 minutes walking, feeding and playing with the animal. It's up to the owner to decide how often their sitter should stop in, but most companies recommend two or three daily visits for dogs and at least one visit per day for cats. Some sitters will stay overnight with animals that don't like to be alone.

Most companies offer a free consultation for the sitter to get acquainted with the pet and its owner. It's a time to discuss the pet's routine, activities, diet and medical issues. Special requests are common.

"One of my clients will leave me three pages of detailed notes for his cat," says Passos. "During mealtime, one of his

requirements is to open up two cans of food that each have a different flavor and have the cat decide which one she feels like eating," she says.

Some sitters keep connected with owners by sending photos, videos, emails and text messages during their visit. Others simply keep a daily log of the pet's activities. Pet sitters may also be willing to water houseplants, take in the mail and newspaper, switch on lights and adjust draperies during visits.

MAKING THE DECISION

While the majority of owners who hire in-home sitters are only away for a few days, not every animal is a good candidate for the service.

Pets that are in poor health should not be left alone for long stretches of time, says Naomi Garfinkel, co-owner of the Great Neck-based Pet Sitters Club. If a pet has separation anxiety, the experience could also be difficult.

While dogs may prefer the socialization that comes with boarding in a kennel, cats tend to be homebodies and often don't like being moved to a new space. For Donald Goldblatt, the decision to hire the Pet Sitters Club came down to keeping his two dogs, Sushi (a mini poodle) and G.G. (a bichon frise), comfortable when he travels for business.

"Being home is so much better for my dogs because they are in their own environment," says Goldblatt, who lives in Port Washington. "My dogs miss me but are very well taken care of."

FINDING A PRO

It's important to hire a pet-sitting company that is bonded and insured. "It protects the customer and the pet," says Garfinkel, who employs between eight and 11 sitters who make house calls in the north shore Nassau area. Other factors to consider:

* Request (and check) referrals for more peace of mind.

* Find out what the sitter will do in the event your pet has a medical emergency while you're away.

* Ask what the company's backup plan is, in the event the sitter assigned to care for your animal has an emergency and can't make it to your home as planned.

A SAMPLING OF SITTERS

The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (petsitters.org) and Pet Sitters International (petsit.com) list in-home sitters. Here's a sampling of local companies. Rates are for 30 minutes; additional animals may cost extra.

PET SITTERS CLUB INC.

516-466-5617, www.petsittersclubinc.com

TERRITORY New Hyde Park, Great Neck, Port Washington and surrounding towns.

RATE \$21

LONG ISLAND PET NANNY

631-828-4390, lipetnanny.com

TERRITORY Stony Brook vicinity; Coram, Selden, Wading River

RATE \$20

LATCH KEY PETS INC.

631-724-5070, latchkeypets.com

TERRITORY St. James, Smithtown, Nesconset, Hauppauge and Lake Grove.

RATE \$20

THE PURRFECTION PET SITTERS

631-835-1086, thepurrfectionpetsitters.com

TERRITORY Massapequa to Brightwaters

RATE \$20 (35-45 minutes)