

A pet's best friend
ELLEN S. WILKOWE DAILY RECORD

Dana Ligos commutes daily from Succasunna to New York City, which leaves her dog Moe at home with plenty of time on his paws.

"I leave the TV on for companionship," Ligos said.

Mary Jo Koehler of Boonton was in a similar situation. With a several-month-old pup at home, she was skittish about changing his routine and environment.

"Oliver was still a puppy, and this was the first time we were going away," she said. At the sight of your suitcase, Fido puts on his best puppy-dog eyes, and knowing you're going away, he slinks away to his favorite hiding spot.

Maybe like Ligos you work long hours and he needs, er, relief, not to mention attention. Call them nannies for pets, but pet sitters have come to the rescue and service of your four-legged friend's most basic needs -- and then some -- including yours.

But where to begin?

The prospect of opening your home to a complete stranger and hoping your pet will approve is bound to provoke anxiety.

With no federal or state watchdog for pet sitting businesses, finding one that belongs to a pet sitting organization is a good place to start, said Nancy Peterson, spokesperson for the Humane Society of the United States.

"It shows they are serious and looking to improve their services and knowledge," she said. The National Association of Pet Sitters provides pet sitters educational opportunities, including the option to become certified through a series of courses and an exam. The nonprofit trade organization allows members to place their contact information online and identifies certified pet sitters with a logo.

Similarly, Pet Sitters International also offers education and an accreditation program. The U.S. and Canadian organization provides a pet sitter locator service on its Web site. Organization membership credentials aside, pet sitters should be bonded and insured and be able to provide client referrals, Peterson said.

"They should also come to the house beforehand to interact with the pet," she said. "Before you go away, you might want to have them spend the night."

The meet and greet is a standard operating procedure for Mike Graham, a bonded and insured pet sitter who owns and operates the franchise Fetch! Pet Care of Central Morris County from his Hopatcong home.

"Our policy is that the client will be able to meet anyone who will be entering their home," he said.

His sitters conduct an in-house consultation that allows them to get pet-acquainted and learn the animal's routines including if there are special instructions such as medication to administer.

It's a second career for Graham. The former computer consultant switched from software to pet care last spring.

"It was hard to make it on your own in pet sitting, so I went with the franchise," he said. In addition to firsthand experience in caring for his own pooches, Graham trained with Fetch! prior to launching his franchise. He is a member of the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters.

He now oversees 12 sitters who serve the central Morris County area . He charges \$20 per visit and \$65 for overnight.

"We have several types of types of clients," he said. "Those working long hours Monday through Friday and those going on vacation. Then there's the regulars who travel for business."

Having boarded previous pets, Ligos opted for a sitter when her "70-pound lapdog" seemed to fare better with one-on-one human companionship in his home.

When her last pet sitter closed shop, Ligos researched online and came across Fetch! The meet-and-greet put her and Moe at ease. Now the pooch finds himself at the beck and call of Shannon O'Leary of Hopatcong.

"It's hard to trust someone with your pet," Ligos said.

Quelling such anxiety, the sitter leaves a report card after each visit.

Sitter accessibility and the behavioral report cards also put Mary Jo Koehler at ease. A Fetch! flier left in her mailbox served as a calling card to leave Oliver in safe hands. "It's more than just 'Here's the keys, see ya,'" Koehler said. "You could call (the sitter) and check in."

For O'Leary, the flexibility of pet sitting melds with her student life at County College of Morris in Randolph

While Graham oversees a number of pet sitters, Lauren Huston of Morristown runs her own show -- except for the occasional input from her "silent" business partner -- a 4-year-old Labradoodle.

Not your typical pet sitters, Huston and her dog Raegan both boast therapeutic credentials

and experience: A package deal, Huston and Raegan are a certified handler/therapy dog team and Huston is also a licensed social worker.

Huston jumped on the pet sitting circuit while attending graduate school seven years ago. After four years of family and child counseling, she couldn't quite shake the pet sitting. She relocated from Hoboken to Morristown and has taken her pet sitting services to several levels and species.

Petcetera by Lauren, the name of her company, "means all pets," she said. Her clients have included dogs, cats, birds, fish -- even a Koi pond -- all of whom she consults with beforehand.

Like Graham, Huston is bonded and insured and belongs to the National Association of Pet Sitters, as well as Pet Sitters International.

In combining her social work and pet care skills, she is growing a niche of assisting homebound elderly who are unable to care for pets in full capacity.

In addition to \$20 per visit, she offers boarding options starting at \$75 a night in her apartment to dogs that meet Raegan's approval.

If all tails wag and sniff tests pan out, she'll take the animal in but only one at a time. Such was the case with Jody Myers of Morristown and her "puffy Pomeranian" Theo. A transplant from Philadelphia who had owned her own company, Myers doted on Theo from home until a change in jobs resulted in a change in location.

"I was working in Philly and they had doggy day cares there," she said.

Luck of the draw landed Myers and Theo corporate housing in Huston's building. "Theo attracts attention, so someone said, 'There's the best dog sitter in your building.'" A global marketing director for Bayer Healthcare, Myers finds herself in a different country every week. Peace of mind come along with knowing Theo is getting the care and attention he has grown accustomed to receiving, she said.

"He's so calm and content when I get home," she said. "Pets are family for a lot of us, and finding someone like Lauren, you don't just have a dog sitter. You have a highly trained behaviorist."

The decision to leave a pet in the hands of a sitter or in the care of boarding facility can often be determined by the personality of the animal.

"A lot depends on the pet's reaction," Peterson said. "If you have a social animal a kennel might be good, but some pets may find it stressful or get depressed."

The same means used to find pet sitters -- veterinarian referrals and word-of-mouth, for example, as well as organization memberships, such as Pet Care Services Organization

(formerly the American Boarding and Kennel Association) -- can help narrow down the search, Peterson said.

"Not all have the same amenities," she said. "There's extra playtime, bathing, training." American Animal Hospital in Randolph, for one, offers on-site boarding and built-in veterinarian access, said staff veterinarian Dr. Brian Voynick, host of "Pet Stop" on cable. Each canine guest gets four daily walks and is monitored for changes in appetite, temperature, water consumption and bathroom habits, he said. Substitute petting for walks and cats are afforded the same monitoring techniques. Animals are weighed prior to checking in, during and after their stay.

Boarding dogs costs anywhere from \$32-\$45 depending on weight and cats cost \$27. In narrowing down their boarding choices, Voynick recommends that pet owners tour the facility and check for basics such as cleanliness.

"Make sure to ask the staff how they monitor the animals," he said. In the meantime, pet owners should make available a vaccine certificate and make sure their animal has had a veterinarian exam in the last year.

If hiring a pet sitter, Voynick recommends the employ similar monitoring techniques in terms of food, water and bathroom habits.

A dog or cat that refuses food, water and relief may be exhibiting symptoms of an ailment, outside of missing its owner.

Cat sitters should monitor the litter box for regular excretion and also keep a watch on appetite.

A cat refusing food can be subject to fatty liver disease, he said. Likewise, a male cat who isn't excreting, requires emergency attention.

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Prepping Your Pet Sitter & Sniffing Out a Boarding Facility

Once you have identified a potential pet sitter:

- Develop a set of questions and conduct a thorough interview.
- Ask for references.
- Request proof of bonding and liability insurance coverage.
- Make sure he or she interacts well with your pet.
- Be sure to determine what your needs are and exactly how much services will cost.
- Put everything needed for your pet's care in a specific area so the sitter doesn't have to search for leashes, food or medications.
- If the sitter will be coming in the evening, hook up a timer light so he or she will not have to come to a dark house.
- Select a neighbor to keep an eye on your place while you're gone.
- Let him or her know that a pet sitter will be coming to your home.
- Provide him or her with a key in case of an emergency, inclement weather or in the event the pet sitter cannot make a scheduled visit.
- Give pet sitter the neighbor's name and phone number.

SOURCE: National Association of Professional Pet Sitters

When visiting a potential kennel: · Does the facility look and smell clean? · Is there sufficient ventilation and light? · Is a comfortable temperature maintained? · Does the staff seem knowledgeable and caring? · Are pets required to be current on their vaccinations, including the vaccine for canine kennel cough (Bordetella)? · Does each dog have his own adequately sized indoor-outdoor run or an indoor run and a schedule for exercise? · Are outdoor runs and exercise areas protected from wind, rain and snow? · Are resting boards and bedding provided to allow dogs to rest off the concrete floor? · Are cats housed away from dogs? · Is there enough space for cats to move around comfortably? · Is there enough space between the litter box and food bowls? · How often are pets fed? · Can the owner bring a pet's special food? · What veterinary services are available? · Are other services available such as grooming, training, bathing? · How are rates calculated?

SOURCE: Humane Society of the United States