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Crestview woman fosters military pets

By **BRIAN HUGHES** | Crestview News Bulletin

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CRESTVIEW — Two airmen can focus on their overseas mission with peace of mind, knowing their dogs, Dizzy and Zoe, are in good hands during deployment.

And for Crestview volunteer pet sitter Lori Phillips, making the black-and-white spaniel mixes part of her family is an opportunity to thank the active-duty airmen for their service.

Phillips is a volunteer with Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet, a nationwide organization that assures a deployed or wounded member of the military doesn't have to give up a pet.

Military members unaware of the program sometimes are forced to sign over pet ownership to an agency that might then put the animals up for adoption while their owners are deployed, Phillips said.

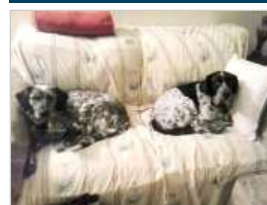
"Think how heartbreaking that is when they came back and they can't get their pets back," she said.

REGULATED BY CONTRACT

Under the program, volunteers sign a contract for the duration of the military member's deployment. Sitters get to meet the pets and their owners before deployment to determine compatibility.

Volunteers can determine which species of pet they want to accept in their home. Phillips, who has a dog of her own, was fairly open minded.

"I signed up for everything, except for snakes," she said.

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Dizzy and Zoe moved in with her at the end of February and will remain until their “parents,” as Phillips calls their owners, return from deployment in June.

Under the contract signed with Guardian Angels for Soldiers’ Pet, “You agree to give the dog or cat back when the parents come back,” Phillips said.

Pet owners agree to provide money for the animals’ expenses, but volunteers may not accept a stipend or compensation for their services.

“With the contract, the pet parents agree to leave gift cards for supplies or vet visits,” Phillips said.

A VALUABLE SERVICE

Phillips regularly sends photos and videos of Dizzy and Zoe to their owners and keeps them updated on their dogs’ health and activities.

“I have a dog myself,” she said. “They really sort of bonded with each other, but you can really tell they miss their mom and dad.”

She said the program offers a valuable service to active-duty military; one that the public doesn’t often consider.

“Imagine having to leave everything for three or six months or a year, and imagine if you had to sign over your pet,” Phillips said. “... This is one thing I can do for them.”

She said her hope is more volunteers will join the program, and more members of the military will participate in it and share the sense of satisfaction she has experienced.

“I can do a little bit for my country, and this is my part,” Phillips said.

WANT TO VOLUNTEER?

Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer pet sitter for a deployed military member may contact Monica Lanier, Florida foster coordination liaison with Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet at coordination.fl@guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org. For more information about the program, visit www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org.

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