

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Series on Soldiers and Dogs, Part One - Interview With Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet



Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet is a registered 501c3 that relies on the generosity of volunteers and whose main purpose is to support our military service members, veterans, and their beloved pets to ensure that the pets are reunited with their owners following deployment to harm's way (combat or peace keeping mission) or emergency hardship overseas. This is a big commitment and finding volunteers who are up to the task cannot be easy. Each time I look at their website I see the organization is present in another state and is fostering even more animals. Please give them a thorough look, tell people about them, give money if you can, or see if you are suited to help them in their mission by being a foster parent to an animal while their owner is called to duty.

Here are their objectives, as stated on their website:

Objective 1: Establish a network of foster families providing a loving and healthy home environment for the pet(s) until they can be reunited with their owner throughout the United States.

Objective 2: Recruit and appoint "State Volunteer Directors" in states outside of Arkansas to promote the organization, recruit/interview potential foster homes, and volunteers to promote the organization, our "Foster Home" program/service, and recruit volunteers in their state

Objective 3: Establish and maintain the first Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet "Military, Veterans, and Pet" (MVP) Sanctuary in Arkansas to ensure there is a caring, loving, and safe home-like environment for these pets when individual foster home caregivers are not available.

Objective 4: Establish a network with various military locations, Family Readiness Groups (FRGs), military based veterinarians, volunteer pet transport groups, other military support organizations, and animal care facilities (humane societies, animal shelters, and rescue groups).

Objective 5: Establish a network of news media contacts to keep the public informed about our organization and our progress in accomplishing our mission.

Objective 6: Establish communication with the appropriate government agencies to ensure compliance with all regulations (federal, state, and local).

Objective 7: Provide financial assistance for the caring of the pet in regards to food and required medical care as needed, while the pet is in the care of the Guardian Angels For Soldier's Pet approved foster home caregiver where funds are available.

Questions & Answers with Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet:

Q: How did Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet (GASP) begin?

A: Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet (GASP) incorporated in the natural state of Arkansas on January 28, 2005 after the founders (Linda Spurlin-Dominik and Carol Olmedo) learned that military service members across the country had pets that needed a caring, loving, and safe home to care for them during the pet owner's deployment to fight the global war on terrorism (combat and peace keeping missions), but had not been able to find someone to care for them.

This left the deploying active duty military pet owner with only one option, which was to relinquish their beloved pets and pet ownership rights to an animal shelter or rescue group never to see their pets again, know if they got a new good home, or ended up being euthanized.

GASP initially started with 2 non-foster home volunteers (founders) and 5 potential foster homes in the state of AR. Five years later the organization has grown and become recognized as a national 501c3 ALL volunteer military support organization with 1100+ potential foster homes across the country, approximately 100 pets in our approved foster homes by end of 2009, and volunteers at the national and state level involved with the administration/coordination efforts of the organization.

Q: How many animals are being fostered now and how does fostering work?

A: As of end of Sept '09 there are 83 pets fostered through our organization and 55 pets have been reunited with their owners following a deployment or emergency hardship over the past 2 years. We operate in all states through volunteers and our programs/services are available in all states to those military service members deploying to harm's way (combat or peace-keeping mission).

Q: What makes an ideal foster family or household?

A: An ideal foster home is the one that meets the needs of the pet they will be fostering.

Foster Home volunteers (known as Guardian Angels) generally foster a pet for 6 months to 17 months depending on the military service member's branch of service and their deployment term. Emergency hardship situations where a foster home is needed can range from 3 to 12 months.

From a monetary perspective, the service member pet owner covers normal/standard pet related costs (food/treats, veterinarian care, grooming),

however in many cases the foster home may choose to cover the food/treat costs.

Where funds are available GASP will assist in emergency/unforeseen pet related expenses via our "Military Pet Assistance" fund.

How the pet care related costs are paid is determined via our written agreement between GASP, the pet owner, and the approved foster home prior to placement of the pet into a specific home.

The approved foster home is agreeing to open their heart and home to a beloved pet(s) to provide a caring, loving, and safe temporary home environment until the owner is reunited with their pet(s).

Q: Is it difficult to foster a pet emotionally? I would think this is probably the biggest consideration for people, after the money required.

A: The biggest consideration that our foster homes seem to have relates to the safe return of the pet owner from harm's way so they can be reunited with their pets. These beloved pets are placed in caring, loving, and safe homes similar to the environment the pets are used to.

Q: How do soldiers find Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet?

A: Soldiers find out about GASP through many avenues. We have volunteers in many states who "spread the word" by building relationships with local business and posting information in those stores. We are also actively communicating with newspapers and radio stations on military bases throughout the county.

We are even on social networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and MySpace!

The Guardian Angel caring for the pet(s) are encouraged to communicate with the pet owner whether via email or snail mail. Each situation is different. From the organization perspective, we maintain contact with the foster home to ensure the pet is doing well.

One woman tells her story of discovering GASP, "I heard about your organization through Military.com and think this is a wonderful idea. My husband is active duty Navy and we had never heard of the services you offer."

Comments from our website "Feedback" page:

T.R., Spouse of Deployed Hero (Arizona) — *"I would have lost one of my family members (my puppy casino) if it weren't for Guardian angels helping me save him...it's hard enough when your husband is deployed its harder to be away from your animals while he's gone, guardian angels supports and protects, I couldn't have done it without them...thank you!"*

B.S., Deployed Hero (Tennessee) — *"This is the organization that found a foster home for my dog for my upcoming one year deployment. It is an organization of volunteers. If you ever wonder how you can contribute to supporting our troops it may just be by supporting an organization that takes care of soldiers' pets for them. I am certainly thankful for them."*

Q: How do you get your volunteers and how should people let you know they are interested in fostering a pet for a deployed soldier?

A: Our volunteers are the heart of this organization and we could not do what we do without the generosity of people all over the country. Potential foster homes primarily are recruited through our flyers, word of mouth, and various other avenues such as news articles. Other volunteer type positions (non-foster homes) are primarily recruited through volunteer positions posted on our "Volunteer" page and through <http://www.volunteermatch.org/>.

Those interested in being a possible foster home through our organization may do so by visiting our website www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org/ and (clicking on "How can I help" and the "Foster A Pet" links).

Q: What things are upcoming for GASP?

A: Currently others will be holding various events during the holiday season where net proceeds will be sent to Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet.

The known events being planned at this time are:

Colorado - Good Sam Camping Chapter will be holding a Christmas party on 12/6 for their members with a raffle where proceeds are being allocated to our organization toward our MVP Sanctuary project.

Georgia - Collier Chiropractic in Atlanta will be holding a fundraising event during the week of 12/7 where proceeds are being allocated to our organization toward our MVP Sanctuary project.

Q: How can people make a contribution to GASP and how do you use the money?

A: Visit <http://www.guardianangelsforsoldierspet.org/> and click on "How can I help" (Contribute link). Donations can be made online via the "Donate" button or by sending a check/money order (payable to Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet) to our national office.

Unless a donation is earmarked for a specific program or our MVP Sanctuary project, we allocate donations as follows:

Programs – 75% (25% Foster Home, 25%-Military Pet Assistance, 25%-MVP Sanctuary),

Administrative – 15%,

Fundraising – 10%.

Donations earmarked for a specific purpose is allocated 100% toward the identified program (Foster Home or Military Pet Assistance or the MVP Sanctuary project).

Q: Is there anything you'd like the public to know about GASP?

A: We are the first 501c3 ***ALL volunteer military support organization*** established specifically to support our troops and their beloved pets. We are unique since we have combined the best of 2 worlds (troop support and animal care) by providing assistance to our deploying military service members with their pets so they can be reunited with these beloved pets following a deployment to harm's way and not have to relinquish their legal pet ownership rights to a shelter/rescue group because of the deployment. We are not an animal shelter or animal rescue group, our mission/purpose is to help our military who want to be reunited with their pets and not have to surrender their legal pet ownership rights to an animal shelter or animal rescue group because they had no other option.

We do not accept animals from shelters/rescue groups or involved with permanent re-homing of pets turned over to shelters/rescue groups, since the legal pet owner is the shelter/rescue group and not a military service member.

It is an honor to serve our military who sacrifice so much to keep us safe in the US by caring for their pets.