

Who will take care of my pet?



§ Story and photos by Patsy Lynch

Introducing your ‘Guardian Angels’

You have just gotten a call saying to be ready to deploy. Your bag is packed, your accounts are set up for your monthly expenses and your home is secure. All set, right? Whoops, what about your pet?

Everyday, hundreds of military personnel face these issues as they prepare to embark on a deployment that can last for several months or years. The stress of not knowing who will care for their beloved pet can weigh heavily and potentially affect their ability to perform their job.

Fortunately, there are programs that aid soldiers and sailors. One of these organizations is Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet. Operating since 2005, it has a foster home program that assists those deploying to combat or potential combat-related deployments, peacekeeping missions and/or humanitarian missions. The foster home program coverage may range from two to twelve months, depending on the situation.

For Justen Wullenwaber, who is an active-duty Navy Aviation Ordnanceman First Class, the Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet has been a life-saver.

“I joined the Navy out of high school along with some friends to start a career and to help pay for college.”

Now in his twelfth year, Wullenwaber is getting ready for his fifth deployment. Though he had been deployed in the past, Wullenwaber was concerned about caring for his Husky, Maverick.

“Because I am from the West coast and did not have family in the Virginia area, I was concerned about having Maverick placed in a kennel,” said Wullenwaber. “I was concerned about Maverick’s wellbeing.”

Using the internet, Wullenwaber was able to find Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet. After filling out the application form, he was put in touch with the foster family that eventually took care of Maverick.

“I am getting ready for my new deployment and the same foster family will be taking care of Maverick again. This will give me some peace of mind while I am deployed because I know that Maverick will be in good hands.”

For Deb Coon, being a foster parent with Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet is another way to give back to the service that she loves. Like Justen Wullenwaber, Coon enlisted in the Navy after high school.

“I had an uncle who was in the Navy and his stories really inspired me,” said Coon. “My uncle even went with me to the Navy recruiter’s office where I signed up.”

Coon spent 24 years in the Navy, retiring as a Chief Master-at-Arms (MAC). Her career ranges from Aerographer’s Mate (AG) and then a Military Working Dog handler and kennel supervisor.

After her retirement, Coon did work with other pet foster programs and discovered Guardian Angels for Soldier’s pets about four years ago. Various commitments did not allow her to foster pets until this past October when she, along with her own seven-year-old rescue poodle, Clancy Girl, became a foster mom to Nipsey, a two-year-old French Bulldog, whose owner is in the Navy and currently deployed on a ship.





“Nipsey is full of energy and he and Clancy Girl love to play together,” Coon said. “I try to send Nipsey’s owner an update on a regular basis.”

Costs associated with foster care are usually provided by the pet owner, including any needed veterinary care, food, treats and grooming during the foster care period. If necessary, the National office of Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet may be able to provide financial assistance.

The requirements of the foster home program include the following:

Altered (spay or neutered) and cannot have major aggressive issues.

Must be current on all required vaccinations including Bordetella. This may be for Rabies, Distemper and micro-chipping (for homeless veteran pets) before placement in a registered foster home.

If this is a dog, Heartworm test results must be negative.

If this is a cat, then Feline Leukemia test results must be negative.

While Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet has this foster program, it also has programs that aid homeless veterans. Their companion animals can be placed in one of the registered foster homes, short term pet boarding for up to 14 days when a pet has immediate need for shelter and there



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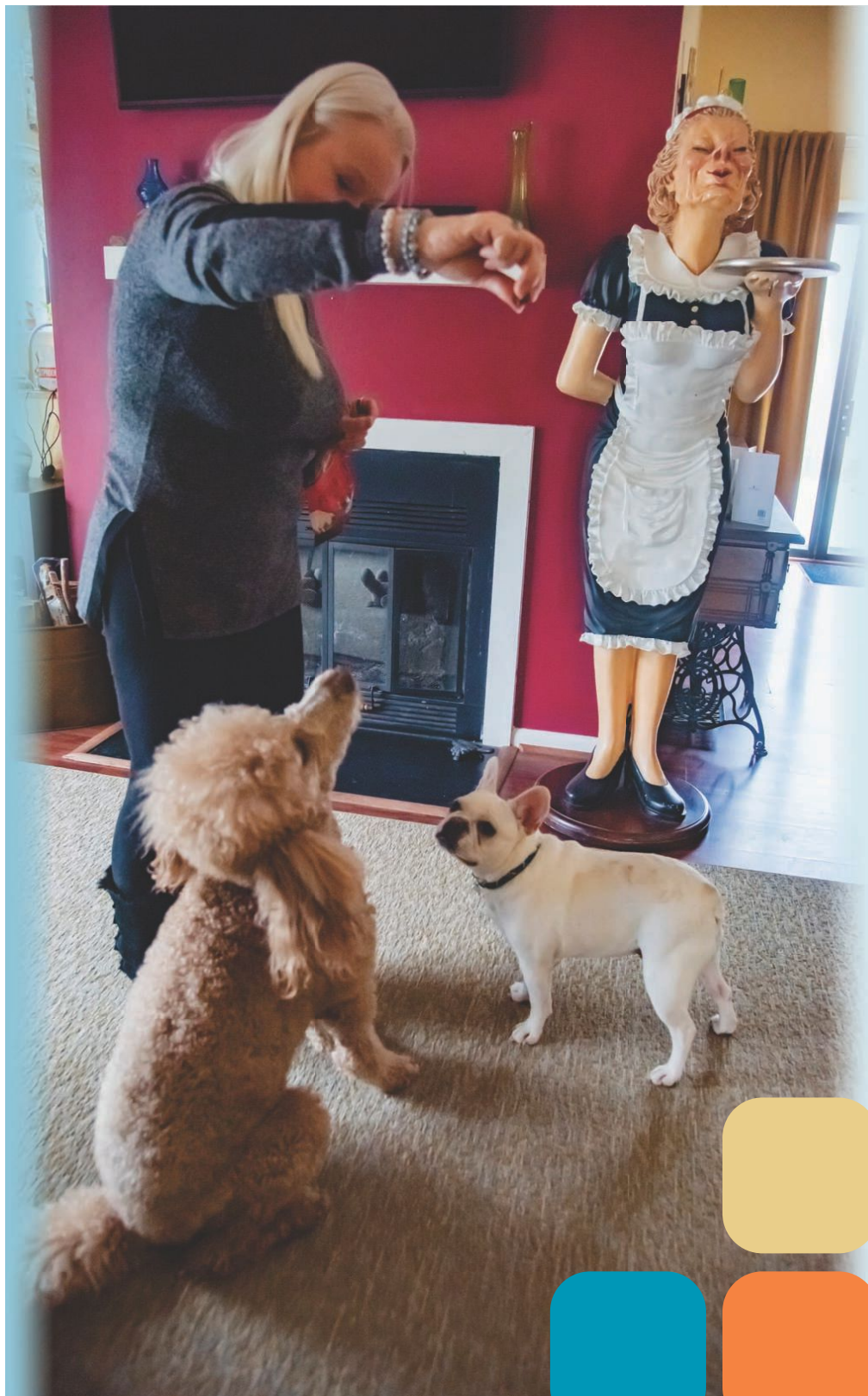
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are no available foster homes, and pet boarding in local licensed boarding facilities for less than 30 days when a veteran pet owner is an 'inpatient' due to unforeseen illness or surgery.

For wounded warriors and families needing foster care assistance due to combat injuries including TBI, PTSD or other major medical issues, this program works with various VA medical representatives.

For families impacted by the loss of a loved one, either through combat or suicide and are being supported through a Survivor Outreach Services (SOS) or Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and are unable to care for the family pet or pets, foster assistance may be available for up to a year. At the end of the foster term, the family is required to either pick up the pet or pets and decide to keep them or surrender them.

For more information about the Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pets, you can visit their website at www.gafsp.org

Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pets does not charge a fee for any of their services.