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How Aggie Animals Are Providing Healing and Hope

Meet four local organizations that are helping train and connect students and residents to service and therapy animals.

By Hilary Nguyen '26

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We often call animals “man’s best friends,” but for some, they offer far more than companionship. Service and therapy pets play a crucial role in the lives of many—whether it’s offering emotional support to a stressed college student or performing lifesaving tasks like guiding someone with a visual impairment through a crowded street.

Recognizing the profound impact of these unique relationships, Aggies have started several life-changing animal assistance programs that provide transformative experiences in Texas and beyond. Learn more about some of Aggieland's on-campus and local organizations that foster this unspoken bond between humans and animals.



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Patriot Paws of Aggieland

Serving those who have served is a fundamental message woven into the fabric of Texas A&M. Since 2013, Patriot Paws of Aggieland has furthered this mission by helping Aggies train and provide countless service dogs at no cost to disabled American veterans.

The service dogs start off as puppies in the program, where they spend two to three years in training with many trainers, from offenders in the Patriot Paws prison program to Texas A&M students. "Our dogs begin training at just 6-8 weeks old, when they're most receptive, allowing us to expose them to as many experiences as possible," said Deanna Hafley '25, the organization's president. "Our goal is to provide quality, well-prepared dogs for our veterans."

Once the dogs complete training, they are assigned to their veteran, which could be in Texas or across the country. These dogs can then provide emotional and mobility support, helping their owners meet needs ranging from comfort and companionship to specific tasks like opening doors and retrieving items. "I often hear veterans say getting their dog was 'the start of their new life,'" Hafley said. "Our veterans have made sacrifices for our country that many civilians can hardly imagine. By training service dogs to offer them companionship and assistance after their service, I hope we are not only helping them reclaim their life but also expressing our deepest gratitude."



Photo provided by Patriot Paws of Aggieland.

Each service dog costs over \$40,000 to completely train. By supporting Patriot Paws of Aggieland, you can help the program continue to grow and serve those who have served. Meet with one of our fundraising experts, Reagan Chessher '96, to empower Aggies to support our veterans today.

Courtney Cares

On weekends, Parsons Mounted Cavalry parades down Houston Street before football games and in cities across the state. But on weekdays, the horses become heroes at Freeman Arena, participating in equine therapy through the Courtney Grimshaw Equine Therapeutic Program, or Courtney Cares.

Launched in 2012, Courtney Cares honors Courtney Grimshaw '85 and her dream of starting a horseback riding camp for kids. Grimshaw was in the process of building a horse barn for the camp in Thorndale, Texas, when she unexpectedly passed away. To honor her, Grimshaw's family sold the property and used the proceeds to establish an equine therapy program at Texas A&M in her name.



Photo by Slone Milstein, provided on behalf of Courtney Cares.

Courtney Cares provides two types of riding sessions at no charge for participants. The first serves local children and adults with physical or emotional challenges. "In addition to helping these individuals live the most normal lives possible, these sessions bring joy to children who might rarely express emotion and help those with physical limitations improve their strength and posture," said Craig Huffhines '90, director of the Texas A&M Institute for Equine Sciences.

The second session is for veterans who want to learn leadership through horsemanship. "When it's just them and the horse out there on the grounds, our veterans can overcome their fears, reestablish confidence and take ownership of their life," Huffhines added.

While equine therapy is a growing field of research, Courtney Cares is putting Texas A&M on the map by highlighting the undeniable bond between horses and humans. "Horses sense even the smallest rider cues, from a relaxed heartbeat to a nervous grip— the bond fostered by the deep connection between the horse and rider is what makes this therapy so powerful," said Texas A&M Foundation donor Kay Pence, who, along with her late husband Charles Pence '51, has provided vital support for Courtney Cares, most recently with a \$200,000 gift.

Courtney Cares needs your help to continue Grimshaw's dream of healing others through horses. Meet with Jansen Merrill '18 to learn how your support can make a difference. Click here to expand the impact of the program with your support.

Aggieland Pets With a Purpose

Visit the Memorial Student Center or Sterling C. Evans Library during finals week, and it won't take long to notice the therapy animals from Aggieland Pets With a Purpose hard at work. "After witnessing the impact of animal therapy programs in other Texas cities, I knew College Station needed one too," said Kit Darling '74 '90, a former infection control coordinator at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences. This vision led her to help found Aggieland Pets With a Purpose in 2002.

The group is composed of dogs, cats, horses and even a rabbit, and the Texas A&M campus is just one of many places in town they visit. They can also be found spreading joy and peace at local schools, nursing homes and hospitals.

One of Darling's most memorable experiences was when her first therapy dog, Dexter, visited an unresponsive patient at CHI St. Joseph Health Rehabilitation Hospital. She placed Dexter in the bed with the patient and laid the patient's hand over him. When they returned the following week, the patient was waiting for Dexter in the therapy room. "She told me she was aware of Dexter's visit," Darling recalled. "It's always amazing to witness how animals help people heal."

As the organization continues to grow, it has become a staple in the Texas A&M community. "I've had students come up and show me pictures with our pets from their freshman year when they're now seniors," Darling said. "Moments like these always make our visits to campus worthwhile."

Help the pets in this organization spread comfort and joy throughout Aggieland. Meet with Matt Callaway '05 to discover how your interest in pet therapy can make an impact on the Texas A&M community.



Photo by The Eagle, courtesy of Aggieland Pets with a Purpose.

Aggie Guide Dogs and Service Dogs

Whether they're walking across campus with their trainer or sitting quietly under a classroom seat, the dogs wearing "in training" vests from Aggie Guide Dogs and Service Dogs have been a familiar presence at Texas A&M for decades. Founded in 1997, this organization introduced service dog training to campus and was one of the first of its kind in the country. "Our goal is to train puppies to become service dogs while educating the public about the need for them," said Avery Kracmer '26, the organization's public relations director. "These dogs are like living medical equipment—they have the power to help someone take back their life. Training them is a unique way to give back to the community."

Student trainers are assigned their puppies at around 8 weeks old and work with them until they're ready to transition to a specialized program, where the dogs are trained to become specific types of service dogs, such as PTSD or alert dogs. "I love witnessing the transformation of a hyperactive puppy into a well-behaved companion who stays by their owner's side and doesn't get distracted," Kracmer said. "Knowing I helped train dogs that will one day change someone's life has been one of the most impactful experiences in my college career."

For many students in the organization like Kracmer, helping raise dogs in college has also allowed them to find community in Aggieland. "As you walk around campus, people are drawn to the dogs, sparking conversations," Kracmer said. "It feels wonderful to share that experience and gives you a true sense of purpose at Texas A&M."



Photo provided by Aggie Guide Dogs and Service Dogs.

Support puppies' training and empower students to make a meaningful impact during their time in Aggieland. Reach out to Leslie Joyce '03 to discuss the meaningful impact you can make for the future of Aggie Guide Dogs and Service Dogs.



Texas A&M Foundation

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