

# How ComForT “works”.....

After you receive your Delta Society badge, you may begin participating in actual ComForT visits with your animal. Prior to receiving your badge you may only “shadow” ComForT volunteers on their visits.

There are two types of ComForT visits: 1) Group, and 2) Individual, both described below. ComForT recommends that new volunteers go on group visits for several months before attempting individual visits. If you elect to do individual visits, having gone on various group visits will help you discern the kind of facilities / populations that are most enjoyable for you and your animal. Some ComForT volunteers only attend group visits, some only attend individual visits, and some attend both types of visits. It depends on your preferences as well as your schedule.

## ComForT Volunteer Requirements

In order to maintain active status, ComForT volunteers should contribute a minimum of 10 direct contact hours per calendar year. An animal who visits less frequently than this may not keep up their social skills, resulting in anxiety on their part and less enjoyment for both of you.

## Tracking Your Volunteer Hours

At the end of each month, you will be asked to report your monthly volunteer hours. ComForT tracks this information at the request of the Area Agency on Aging for North Florida and it serves to qualify ComForT for continued receipt of Agency funding.

Track and report your hours in the following categories:

- Group visit hours
- Individual visit hours
- Indirect hours

Group and individual visit hours are both considered direct contact (i.e. interaction of your animal with facility residents). Even though visits may last less than an hour, for tracking purposes, round up to the nearest whole hour.

Indirect hours are for activities (with or without your animal) that do not involve direct contact with facility residents. Examples of indirect activities would be: shadow visits, representing ComForT in a community event (e.g. Walk for Alzheimer’s, pet therapy demonstrations), assisting at ComForT training classes and Delta Society evaluations, serving on ComForT advisory board, making orientation visits to meet facility director and arrange individual visits, etc.

## Group Visits

The ComForT program coordinator (Stephanie Perkins) arranges the quarterly group visit schedule. The quarterly schedule is published in ComForT’s newsletter, “Paw Prints.” Important - let Stephanie know which visits you would like to participate in.

Groups comprised of 4-6 handlers and their animals go together into various Leon County facilities. Each group visit has a group leader and ComForT has formal facility agreements in place to ensure Delta Society liability coverage. The group leader signs in and out on behalf of the group. It is a good idea to let the group leader know if it is your first time visiting a given facility - they can alert you to any special features of the facility.

It is VERY important to arrive outside the facility 10-15 minutes prior to the scheduled time so the animals can “greet” each other before encountering facility residents.

Typically the group visit takes place in a central location (e.g. activity room, courtyard) and facility staff members are responsible for bringing interested residents to the designated area. During a group visit, each ComForT volunteer introduces their animal partner, maybe demonstrates a trick or two, and then the team members circulate through the room to interact with the residents.

Group visits typically last from 20 to 40 minutes. The length of time depends primarily on whether or not the animals are enjoying themselves. Handlers must judge whether their own animal partner begins to show any signs of stress, and if so, they may adjust their participation or excuse themselves from the facility.

### Individual Visits

Once you feel comfortable attending group visits you may elect to make individual visits at a particular facility. Contact the ComForT program coordinator (Stephanie Perkins) and express your preferences. Stephanie will give you facility agreement papers and help you set up an orientation visit with the facility. At the orientation visit (conducted WITHOUT your animal) you and the facility representative will complete the paperwork and agree on a regular visitation schedule. DO NOT begin visiting a facility without notifying Stephanie first.

Individual visits may be arranged to take place at any of the locations where group visits take place. Individual visits may last longer than group visits, because they tend to be less stressful for your animal. Your animal becomes familiar with the facility and residents, and there aren't other ComForT animals present to be distracting. Individual visits can be particularly rewarding in that you develop relationships with residents and staff.

In addition, the following locations/programs fall into the “individual visit” category:

- The R.E.A.D. program
- ComForT in the Courts program
- Big Bend Hospice
- Refuge House
- Tallahassee Memorial Hospital

All of these have additional training/screening requirements over and above our regular ComForT training and Delta Society registration. Once you have become a ComForT volunteer, contact Stephanie Perkins if you are interested in any of these particular locations/programs.