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Staff Writer

Animal caretakers gear up for busy summer

Once, when Ruth French, owner of the Tattletails pet-sitting service on Signal Mountain, was locked out of a customer's house by mistake, she crawled through a large doggie door to get inside.

This commitment to taking care of pets is what prompted Ms. French to start her business eight years ago, when she was looking for a pet sitter for her own dog.

Tattletails Pet Sitters, run with the help of wildlife rehabilitation expert Alix Parks, supplies home visits, day care and overnight pet sitting for about 300 pet owners on Signal Mountain.

According to the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, pet sitting is one of the fastest-growing professions in the United States.

Originally a duty shared with neighbors and friends, traveling owners are now calling on professionals to watch their pets while they're gone.

Of the 69 million households in the United States with pets, 3.5 million use professional pet sitters, said Paul Mann, founder and CEO of Fetch Pet Care, the largest pet sitting company in America.

The basics and beyond

Pet sitters in Chattanooga say they are enjoying a steady increase in business.

Amy Davis, owner of Have Paws Will Travel, started pet sitting full time about 2 years ago and said she has only had one or two days off since.

Brenda Engle, owner of Angels Pampered Pets in Soddy-Daisy, also does overnight stays at clients' homes.

"One month I only spent I think 10 nights in my own bed," she said. Summer is the busiest time for pet sitters, but retired pet owners, dog breeders, and business travelers need pet sitting services year round, sitters said.

The traditional job of a pet sitter is to feed, walk, and play with pets while owners are away. But more and more, sitters are offering basic house-sitting duties, such as taking in the mail and alternating lights to make a house look occupied.

Professional sitters, often trained in basic animal care, sitters often look after pets with chronic health problems.

"If (animals) need medication, I can dispense it because I'm certified," said Ms. Engle.

Overnight sitting, private boarding and day care are growing trends. Pet group exercise, yard-waste clean up, grooming, and 'pet taxiing' are some extras pet sitting companies are now offering.

Most sitters cater to pampered pets' needs. Ms. Engle recalled cooking a meal of chicken, peas, carrots and green beans for show dogs and putting rain boots and rain jackets on Lhasa Apsas who couldn't get wet in the rain.

Professional Sitters

Full-time professional sitters often affiliate with a larger consortium to receive insurance and credentials. Members of pet sitter associations, like Pet Sitters International, pay to be insured and bonded, a certification pet owners look for, Ms. Davis said.

Fetch Pet Care, for example, conducts criminal background checks, screens sitters and then trains and tests the before granting certification.

The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters offers training kits in pet first aid and allows traveling pet owners to access live video footage of their pets via www.mypetsittercam.com.

Not all pet sitters work full time.

"A lot of sitters in Chattanooga do it part-time, so they're not insured," said Ms. Davis. "There are more professional sitters in places like Knoxville."

Amateur sitters can advertise their services on web sites like petsits.com and chattanooga.craigslist.com. Sittercity.com, originally for parents seeking baby sitters, lets pet owners search by zip code for screened and certified pet sitters.

Sitters create a profile with their rates, services and travel limits. Jennifer Potter of East Ridge put her name on petsits.com a month ago. She has sat for friends and family before

but has never charged a fee. "I haven't heard from anyone yet, but I have heard that it takes a while for people to respond," said Ms. Potter.

A booming business

Why the sudden boom in spending on our pets? Sitters say our perceptions of pets has changed over the years.

"I think we're more educated about our pets and what they need," said Ms. French.

Others say it's personal.

"A lot of people are putting off having kids," said Mr. Mann. "A lot of baby boomers have empty nest syndrome since their children have grown up. More households have dual incomes and have extra money to spend on their pets."

Ms. Engle agreed. "A lot of my clients, their pets are their children," she said.

Some kennels and boarding clinics are also coming into question, leading pet owners to turn to private pet sitting. Ms. Engle started her business after working with boarded animals as a veterinary technician.

"Ninety-eight percent of the dogs and cats we saw did not do well in kennels," she said. "It's a very stressful environment."

The risk of contracting air-borne illnesses like 'kennel cough' and canine influenza run high in such close proximity to other pets, said Mr. Mann. Psychological trauma from being away from home concern pet owners too.

"Some animals never fully recover from a kennel visit," Mr. Mann said.

Experts say fewer pet owners are leaving their pets for neighbors and friends to watch.

"People no longer live near their families or know their neighbors," say Lori and Scott Mangold, authors of "The Professional Pet Sitter," on their web site (www.pawsitivepress.com).

Second Careers

Mr. Mann said now is the time to get in on pet sitting, because, "there's plenty of business to go around."

Plus, pet sitting appeals to people seeking satisfying new career options, say the Mangolds.

"The business is so rapidly expanding because people are out of work, dissatisfied with their careers, companies are downsizing," they said. "Pet sitting appeals to a wide range of people who love animals."

Starting a sitting business doesn't require a large investment, they say. A reliable car, a business license, liability insurance and office supplies are the bare essentials.

Ms. French and Ms. Engle both entered the pet sitting business as a second career. "I've worked in retail, in department stores, I've worked at a vet, and I own another business," said Ms. Engle. "Now I finally feel like I'm doing what God wants me to do."

Mr. Mann said pet sitting is a great way for people to start a career in something they love.

"We see a few different profiles of people opening pet sitting franchises. There are people who have another day job but wanted more variety in their life, wanted to get out and about," he said. "Some people can't own pets at home but want to spend time with animals. Some want to transition into the pet industry."

Ms. French guessed that the pet sitting business has only been around about 20 years. Mr. Mann agreed. "It's recent," he said. "The days of the dog house are pretty much gone."

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