

Holiday Help For Pooches And Pussycats; Sitter services make festivities more fun - for the family pets and their owners

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Ran with "LEAVE YOUR PET IN GOOD HANDS" which has been appended to the end of this story

The holiday season is in high gear -- and what's poor Fido to do when the folks are heading out of town?

More and more, pet owners are turning to pet sitters to ease that holiday tension and spare their pets, and themselves, the trauma of pet travel.

"We're just not as focused on ourself and home life and families as we are on other things at this time of year," said Elizabeth Bonkink of the Kitchener- Waterloo Humane Society.

"We don't do holiday adoptions, mainly because the time is so hectic, so if you have an existing animal, you'll want to find a qualified pet sitter."

Enter Beverly Miller, also known as the Kitty Sitter.

Miller-- an insured, bonded and accredited pet sitter -- has been tending the local feline flock for four years now.

"Generally, cats get really stressed when taken out of their home environment," said Miller, 48, a former communications manager who gave up corporate life to pursue her pet-care passion.

Over the holidays, Miller visits up to seven pet-households a day, changing litter, filling food bowls and bringing house-bound pets some holiday cheer.

She also rotates lights, collects mail, waters plants and has been known to run her car up and down snowy driveways to top off that "lived-in" look while clients are away.

Her services start at \$15 a visit for up to three cats, with additional costs for administering medication, tending to additional cats or kittens or more than 10 plants.

Noni Campbell and Tony Bridger have turned to Miller in the past when the usual family members were no longer available to care for their cats.

They said they chose a pet sitter over boarding in part to ease the stress on their pets.

"The comfort that they experience in their own home was a determinant," Campbell said.

"It is also the peace of mind of knowing our pets are not in a stressful environment and that someone is checking on the house on a daily basis."

Leaving pets in the care of friends or neighbours at a time when most people are busy focusing on the holidays can be risky, said Bonkink.

"The majority of the calls that come in now is because people have left pets with someone who has just tied them up outside," she said.

"Your lifestyle is just not normal at this time of year and it's easy for pets to get stressed. Stress makes them more susceptible (to) getting sick."

Miller, who is certified in pet first aid, said a professional can really make a difference when it comes to peace of mind for pet parents on vacation.

"If that animal develops a serious health issue, a neighbour or friend may not be able to deal with it," she said.

"I'm committed to go to the client's house each day and my full attention is on that cat."

At Dog Gone Walking, a Waterloo-based dog walking and pet sitting service, employees are busy easing the additional stresses that come with pet ownership at holiday time.

"A lot of people have Christmas parties to go to or want to go shopping for the day in Toronto, so we're busy," said Mandy Storey, 30, who started the business four years ago with husband Scott.

"We're always available. A neighbour or friend might say they'll take your pet out, but people are busy this time of year. We're here Monday to Sunday."

Storey, a former flight attendant and African Lion Safari tour guide, has a team of five dog walkers, who also tend to cat clientele.

Their most popular services, daily dog walks and cat care for up to two kitties, cost \$15.98 plus GST per visit and includes feedings, treats, walking, pet pampering and socialization.

While Dog Gone Walking is closed the week between Christmas and New Year's, Storey said people looking for a gift for finicky pet parents or for the pet himself will often inquire about gift certificates.

So how exactly do you find the perfect sitter for your pet?

Both Miller and Storey offer free introduction sessions, so owners can get acquainted with the sitter.

"You really want to see if that person enjoys your pet and how they react to the sitter," said Miller.

Miller and Storey recommend asking all the questions you would of anyone coming into your home, including requesting references and ensuring the sitter is bonded and insured.

"I recognize people are hiring me on a leap of faith " Miller said.

"My goal is make sure they're comfortable with me in their home."

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LEAVE YOUR PET IN GOOD HANDS

When hunting for the perfect pet sitter:

Meet with the sitter prior to leaving on vacation so you can watch how the sitter interacts with your pet.

Check credentials and make sure the sitter is bonded and insured.

Ensure they have a back-up sitter lined up in case of an emergency.

Be certain to ask for references.

Credit: RECORD STAFF