

Airport therapy dogs offer stress relief to travelers and staff alike. By Jen Reeder

Ready for *Takeoff*

Left to right: Eve, The Dude, and Maple outside LAX

The young girl sitting by herself in Florida's Pensacola International Airport seemed nervous, so Cindy Wartman and her chocolate Labrador Retriever, Hope, headed over to say hello. They learned the girl was an unaccompanied minor about to fly in an airplane for the very first time.

As a therapy dog for the airport's Pup Patrol, Hope loves meeting new people and charming them by offering her paw to shake. Soon, the girl was giggling as the Lab kept shaking hands and being sweet with her.

They stayed with the girl until it was time for her to board her plane. She seemed much calmer, and Wartman handed her a parting gift: Hope's Pup Patrol trading card.

"I told her to look at Hope's picture and just remember how much Hope loves her if she gets nervous on the flight," Wartman recalls. "Hopefully that helped along the way."

It's all in a day's work for an airport therapy dog team, an unusual form of volunteering that's taking off at airports across the country. The goal is to offer



Hope meets a toddler.

Left: Courtesy of Denver International Airport; Right: Courtesy of Pensacola International Airport

Olaf the Great Dane



stress relief and smiles to travelers as well as staff to brighten everyone's day through special canine connections.

Wartman finds it incredibly rewarding to watch Hope work her magic in the airport, whether by offering her belly to a crying toddler who decides to have fun petting the dog instead of wailing (while parents mouth "thank you") or shaking hands with people missing their dogs back home.

"I love the fact that I can share her gifts and her love with the community," she says. "It's just a small way of giving back."

Unexpected Support

It's a sentiment shared by many airport therapy dog handlers. Brian Seiber and his Great Dane, Olaf, volunteer on the world's largest airport therapy dog team (per Guinness World Records) at Denver International Airport in Colorado. The Canine Airport Therapy

Squad (CATS) boasts 135 therapy dogs and one cat.

Seiber, an accountant, says his 170-pound dog is a "big love bug" who delights in meeting new friends.

"He is a lover of all people," he says. "He wants to be with people all the time. And he's a very playful boy, even at six years old."

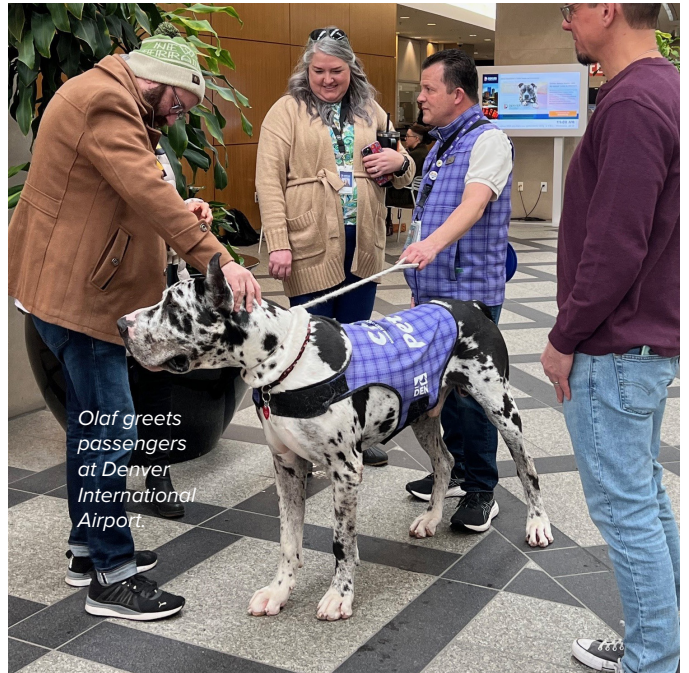
Recently, as Olaf greeted a family of four heading off on vacation, Seiber noticed the teenager wearing a sunflower lanyard, a symbol for a hidden disability. Though nonverbal, the teen lit up while petting Olaf as the rest of the family chatted excitedly.

The next week at the airport, Seiber and Olaf happened to see the same family returning from their trip.

"I recognized them and they recognized us, so it was almost like a little family reunion," he says. "It was just great to see the smiles on their faces again."



Chekhov with a traveler



Olaf greets passengers at Denver International Airport.

Sometimes airport therapy dog visits are particularly poignant, like when travelers are grieving the recent loss of a dog. It can even be the first time a mourner pets a dog since the death of their own, according to Diane Prange, who volunteers with her husband and

their Siberian Husky, Chekhov, on the MSP Animal Ambassadors team at Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport in Minnesota.

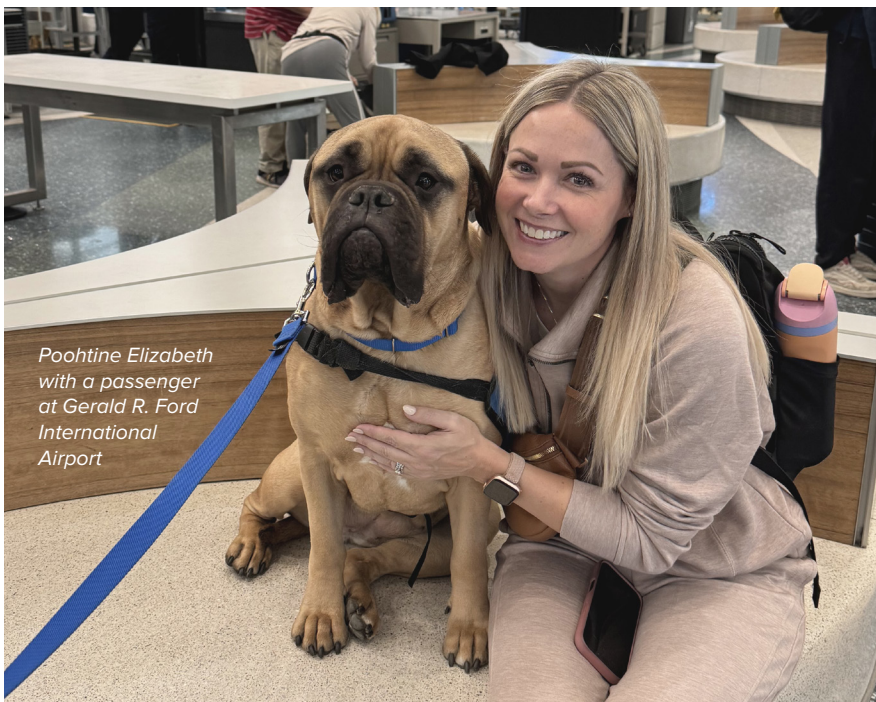
Chekhov, 14, has been volunteering as an airport therapy dog for eight years, and met over 6,300 passengers from 31

countries in his first year of volunteering alone. But Prange still remembers when he comforted a man whose dog had just died and was traveling to visit his dying grandmother.

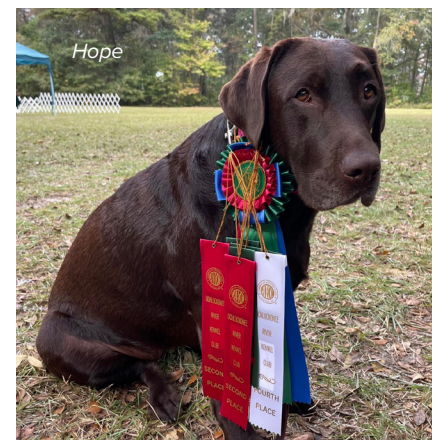
“He got down on the ground and hugged and cried with Chekhov,” she recalls. “Then he said that this made all the difference in his visit and his attitude.”

Another passenger spent time with Chekhov when her plane was delayed for over five hours, and then remarked, “This is the best delay I’ve ever had.”

Chekhov even took a Delta Airlines



Poohtine Elizabeth with a passenger at Gerald R. Ford International Airport



Hope

Top left: Courtesy Diane Prange; Right: Courtesy Erin Pope; Bottom left: Photo by Nathan McCormick; Right: Courtesy of Pensacola International Airport



Therapy dogs celebrate Valentine's Day at Gerald R. Ford International Airport.

“Flight to the North Pole” with children in foster care, since it’s not far-fetched to imagine a Siberian Husky in such a cold climate. (The simulated flight taxis on the tarmac to a meeting with Santa and Mrs. Claus, with gifts and games.)

“He’s a big huggy dog so kids like that,” she says. “Everybody likes it. I like it.”

The experienced therapy dog is also a hit with staff at the airport. Chekhov has learned to stop in front of the donut shop, where one employee likes to toss him a donut hole. Both staff and passengers have laughed at Chekhov’s signature trick: “Shed.” (The beautiful dog is constantly shedding fur.)

Prange used to travel a lot for work and initially wondered why she’d opt to volunteer at an airport in retirement. But she’s found it “amazing” to have her dog act as a bridge to strangers with diverse backgrounds.

“I love meeting so many people from so many different places and being able to hear about their animals, and hear about where they’re going, why they’re going,” she says. “It’s just a wonderful human connection, and the dog connection, too.”

Impactful Efforts

Airport therapy dogs act not just as ambassadors for their communities, but for



Maple meets a child at LAX.

their breeds. Whenever Nathan McCormick volunteers with his Bullmastiff, Poohtine Elizabeth, at Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he’s frequently asked, “What kind of dog is that?”

“It’s very rare to find somebody who’s intimidated or frightened,” he says. “Most people smile and reach out.”

Poohtine Elizabeth, a “laid-back” dog who loves to cuddle, volunteers at the airport as part of the nonprofit West Michigan Therapy Dog’s Gentle Fur in Action program. Because so many members of the airport staff offer her treats, McCormick is conscientious about bringing a drool rag.

McCormick was moved when his “princess” comforted a woman who was about to fly for the first time. She was part of a large group heading to the Caribbean for a family vacation and was so petrified that she was wringing her hands and sobbing.

Instead of heading in the opposite direction, Poohtine made a beeline for the woman and spent about 45 minutes cuddling on the floor with her.

“When their flight was called, the lady got up and gave me a hug and started crying again, not because she was nervous, but she said it was the first time she felt relaxed in several days

Top Photo by Heather McCormick, West Michigan Therapy Dogs; Right Courtesy Kathy Goodwin

What does it take to be a successful therapy dog?

Airport therapy dog programs usually require the dogs to be tested by and registered with a nonprofit therapy dog registry. For the Pets Unstressing Passengers (PUP) program at Los Angeles International Airport, the dogs are typically registered with Alliance of Therapy Dogs, according to Heidi Huebner, director of volunteer and PUP programs.

Required skills are often similar to those on the AKC's [Canine Good Citizen](#) test. While it's possible to work on obedience skills, Huebner believes successful therapy dogs have an inherent temperament and personality that can't be taught—they aren't afraid in busy environments, and they love people.

With the right dog, it can be a deeply rewarding experience on both ends of the leash—and for the people the team meets.

"It's just magic that these dogs bring, and also that human connection that we're missing in the world today," Huebner says. "It's just such a joy."

because she had worked herself up into a frenzy about flying," he recalls. "And she gave Poohtine a big hug and started crying again and told Poohtine she would never forget her."

Making a positive impact on strangers is incredibly rewarding to Kathy Goodwin, who volunteers at California's Los Angeles International Airport on

the Pets Unstressing Passengers (PUP) program with her husband and their English Setters, Maple and The Dude.

She likes to bring a brush so that children can relax while brushing Maple, an AKC Grand Champion, or The Dude, an AKC Therapy Dog Supreme with over 600 visits under his belt. Once, a toddler throwing a tantrum



refused to walk to the gate until she let him hold the leash with her and toddle to the boarding area.

She's been incredibly moved when the dogs have brought comfort to people in distress, like a man whose flight was canceled when he was trying to fly to New York to see his ailing mother, who was not expected to survive the night. Maple and The Dude also comforted a woman who had flown to Los Angeles to visit her parents and just learned their home had been destroyed in the Palisades Fire.

Still, there are countless joyous moments, like when a woman from England raced to pet the dogs because she'd never seen an English Setter in real life—they are a vulnerable breed in the United Kingdom.

Ultimately, volunteering on an airport therapy dog team is fun for the dogs, who relish the attention, and it also provides Goodwin with a sense of purpose in retirement.

"I wish more people who are retired would do this because I think it keeps you young," she says. "It keeps you involved with the world." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.



Chekhov loves meeting staff as well as passengers.

Bottom: Courtesy, Diane Prange