Purina Partners with Duo Dogs to Launch Touch Therapy Dog Training Program for Employees in Response to Mental Health Crisis

Upon certification, Purina Touch Therapy teams will volunteer through Duo Dogs Inc., serving youth and families struggling with mental and physical health challenges

ST. LOUIS (September 13, 2022) – Purina is officially launching an employee-led Touch Therapy dog program in response to increasing demand for therapy dogs by organizations serving youth and families. The 16-week Touch Therapy certification program through St. Louis-based nonprofit, Duo Dogs, will initially include eight Purina associates and their family pets, training together to become certified Duo Touch Therapy teams.

The inaugural Purina employee Touch Therapy training program is in partnership with Duo Dogs, a St. Louis-based nonprofit organization that trains and connects facility and assistance dogs with individuals and communities. Duo certifies each dog and handler to be a Touch Therapy team who visit youth organizations, schools, hospitals, treatment centers, day programs, nursing homes and many other locations as needed, providing comfort, affection and love while delivering several positive mental and physical benefits including lowered blood pressure, reduced stress and anxiety, and reduced feelings of depression. Once the training course is completed later this year, graduates will be eligible to volunteer their efforts in Duo facility partner sites across the greater St. Louis metropolitan area.

The launch of the program comes at a time where mental health awareness is on the rise and an increased demand for animal assisted therapy is leaving organizations like Duo Dogs in need of more volunteer Touch Therapy teams. Seven out of 10 young people say they are struggling with mental health issues, based on a recent study by the National 4-H Council. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 50 percent of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime, and that one in five Americans will experience a mental illness in a given year.

“The timing of this new initiative – certifying and making more Touch Therapy Teams available around our region – is invaluable given the increasing demand for mental health support many organizations are facing. A Touch Team, dog and handler, creates new ways to provide care for people, and particularly youth in our community,” said Dawn Van Houten, CEO of Duo Dogs. “Thanks to these passionate Purina employees and their pets, our pioneering program can deliver more certified Touch Teams so more people can feel the power of pets. We’re so grateful for Purina’s continued support and for joining us to help us address the ongoing mental and physical health needs of our region.”

As part of the Duo Dog Touch Therapy training program, each dog enrolled is screened for temperament, overall health and condition, acceptance of people, and desire to participate in the program. After passing a temperament evaluation, the Purina employee and dog attend an extensive training course focused on obedience and behavior, situational awareness, patient and team safety and facility etiquette. Once the handler and dog complete training and a final evaluation, the team will be certified as a Touch Therapy team and made available to visit a wide range of organizations and facilities as needed.

“At Purina, we believe that pets and people are better together, and this program is going to unleash the

healing power of pets and make a positive difference in our community," said Steve Degnan, Chief Human Resources Officer at Purina. "Our employees understand better than anyone how impactful pet interactions can be, and we're so grateful this group of associates, and their pets, are stepping up and helping a valued partner like Duo Dogs deliver healing pet interactions to those who need it most."

The new employee-pet Touch Therapy program is the latest step Purina has taken to help unleash the power of pets to those in need. Purina supports St. Louis Children's Hospital and helped create the Purina Family Pet Center, a facility which allows family pets to visit pediatric patients inside the hospital. Purina also assisted in the launch of Paws for Hope, which provides St. Louis Children's Hospital patients access to volunteer pet therapy teams. Additional Purina employee touch therapy teams will be certified on an ongoing basis. The company hopes to expand the program into other communities where Purina operates in the near future.

Purina is also sponsoring a litter of puppies to be raised by Purina associates and trained by Duo Dogs to become certified facility and service dogs.

Understanding the Human-Pet Bond

A growing body of research demonstrates the benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) to support the mental wellbeing of individuals struggling with a variety of physical and mental health challenges. Purina actively studies the power of the human-pet bond through research led by its team of pet behavior scientists and provides funding to support research in this area at a global scale.

Recent Purina human-pet bond research includes a study on the positive impact of dog ownership during the pandemic, and a study with Mayo Clinic on the positive impact of therapy dogs on patients with Fibromyalgia. Purina also recently funded and highlighted research by the University of Missouri showing the benefits of pets for parents and their children with autism as well as a study led by researchers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Ontario, Canada to illustrate the value of therapy dogs to provide emotional support to hard-to-reach patients with severe mental illness.

About Nestlé Purina PetCare

Nestlé Purina PetCare creates richer lives for pets and the people who love them. Founded in 1894, Purina has helped dogs and cats live longer, healthier lives by offering scientifically based nutritional innovations.

Purina manufactures some of the world's most trusted and popular pet care products, including Purina Cat Chow, Purina ONE, Pro Plan, Fancy Feast and Tidy Cats. Our more than 8,700 U.S. associates take pride in our trusted pet food, treat and litter brands that feed 51 million dogs and 65 million cats every year. More than 500 Purina scientists, veterinarians, and pet care experts ensure our commitment to unsurpassed quality and nutrition. Purina promotes responsible pet care through our scientific research, our products and our support for pet-related organizations.

Over the past five years, Purina has contributed more than $150 million towards organizations that bring, and keep, people and pets together, as well as those that help our communities and environment thrive. Purina is part of Nestlé, a global leader in Nutrition, Health and Wellness. For more information, visit purina.com or subscribe here to get the latest Purina news.

About Duo Dogs, Inc.

Duo Dogs, Inc., is a St. Louis based nonprofit organization that trains and connects dogs with people to cultivate positive change in individuals, families and communities. Duo breeds and trains assistance dogs, provides touch therapy certification and basic obedience classes. Duo provides on and off-site volunteer opportunities for corporations and individuals throughout the community.

To learn more, visit duodogs.org.

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