

Home Away From Home

What's the best boarding option for your dog?

BY STEPHANIE M. COLMAN

There are many things to consider when choosing to share your life with a dog. Knowing who will care for your dog or dogs when you have to be away from home is just as important as knowing how you'll provide for their everyday needs. Even if overnight travel isn't part of your regular routine, it's wise to think ahead and have a plan for overnight care – just in case it's ever needed. You never know when a family or local emergency may force you and your pets to spend a night or two apart.

Fortunately, today's dog owners have several choices for pet care, ranging from in-home care provided by visiting pet sitters, to a wide range of commercial kenneling options. Each comes with its own unique list of pros and cons and no one choice is right for every dog. It's important to do your homework when considering boarding. After all, you are literally putting your dog's life in the hands of another.

In-home care

Providing care for your dog in your own home is one option, by either recruiting a trusted friend or family member or contracting with a professional pet sitter or sitting service.

Some people choose to have a pet sitter visit several times each day, while others prefer hiring someone to temporarily take up residence in their home. Unless the visiting sitter will make multiple visits throughout the day, this option provides the least amount of supervision for your pet.

In this scenario, your dog is left alone and unsupervised for an unusually long period of time, and for that reason, this option is generally considered to be the most risky.

In contrast, arranging for someone to live in your home while you are gone can provide a greater amount of supervision of your dog with the least amount of disruption to your dog's daily routine. In-home

service providers can bring in the mail, water plants, and give your home a lived-in appearance.

When choosing an in-home pet care provider, it's important to consider the unique needs of your dog and the experience level of the sitter. While a friend or family member may opt to help care for your dog at no charge, and may have a personal history with your pet, they may not be as educated in the fine details of dog care, particularly in things such as recognizing the early signs of stress or distress, or the myriad ways a determined escape artist can find to Houdini his way out of a seemingly secured area.

With a reputable pet sitting service, employees should be screened, professionally trained, bonded, and insured, and pet sitters should be well-versed in all aspects of domestic animal care. As an added bonus, large pet sitting companies generally employ enough personnel to

What you can do . . .

- Research **and tour** prospective boarding facilities well before you need one.
- Conduct a test run of whatever situation you've deemed best on one night when you are available to deal with any problem that might arise.



be able to accommodate last-minute bookings, something not often possible when calling on the aid of a friend, family member, or single-sitter service. This professional training and flexibility comes at a price, however.



You may never find a boarding facility that will make your dog feel *this* comfortable when you have to leave him behind for a vacation or business trip. But it would be nice if the staff members tried!

Similar to recruiting someone to temporarily reside in your home, you may opt to have your dogs stay overnight at the home of a trusted friend, family member, or professional pet sitter. This is slightly more disruptive for your dog than staying in her familiar environment, but it works well for many pet owners, especially when the pet knows the person with whom he'll be staying and/or when the pet is older and not as apt to adjust well to a busy kennel.

Before packing your pup's overnight bag and dropping him off at Aunt Betty's, it's important to be aware of environmental differences that could impact your pet. Does the host have dogs of her own? If so, how do your dogs get along? If they haven't met, be sure to arrange a meet-and-greet prior to travelling so that personality conflicts can surface and be dealt with in advance. Double-check to make sure your pet cannot slip through fencing or other enclosures. Be sure to educate your pet's host on any behavioral quirks that may impact his safety, such as a tendency to door-dart or ingest stray socks! If your host has a swimming pool and your dog has not been taught how to safely swim to the steps, ask that your dog not be left outside unsupervised.

Commercial options

A variety of options exist for owners who prefer to professionally board their dogs. Pet owners can choose from conventional kennel environments to upscale "resort-style" facilities that offer extra services such as group playtime, interactive food puzzles, training time, or grooming and spa services. Many facilities offer "cage-free" boarding where the dogs spend their time roaming with fellow guests and bedding down for the night on dog beds in a common area, while others have dogs confined to their kennels throughout the day except while being exercised by kennel staff.

Keep in mind that what works best for one dog might quickly spell disaster for another. Regardless of the type of service or facility you choose, it's imperative to get to know the ins and outs of the service provider. The following considerations can be helpful in making an educated decision:

■ **Compliance with state and local regulations and adherence to professional standards and practices.** The kenneling industry is unregulated at the Federal level, leaving individual cities and states to implement regulations as they see fit. According to Pet Care Services Asso-

ciation (PCSA), a non-profit organization dedicated to assuring standards of quality and professional care, only about 20 states have adopted any formal regulatory standards for boarding kennels.

As such, many kennel owners operate with little more than a standard business license. When regulations do exist at the city or state level, they are usually minimal and simply address things such as preventing animal cruelty and requiring that adequate food, water, and shelter be available – not exactly standards that put your mind at ease when leaving your pet for the weekend.

"The pet-owning public has expectations when it comes to boarding," says Charlotte Biggs, CKO and board president of PCSA and co-owner of Stay N Play Pet Ranch®, Inc., in Dripping Springs, Texas. "There are so few regulations available. Our mission is to fill that void."

For a fee, membership in PCSA is open to any individual or legally operating business that is actively engaged in the non-veterinary care of pets as a primary service. All active members must agree to adhere to the organization's Code of Ethics and Pet Owner's Bill of Rights, both of which are available for review online

Preparing Your Dog for Boarding

Kennel owner Barb Gibson offers the following tips:

- Expose your dogs to the boarding experience early. Even if you prefer to leave your pet with a trusted family friend, you never know when circumstances might suddenly warrant a stay in a commercial kennel. The older the dog, the harder it is to adjust to the unfamiliar.
- Provide your dog with basic training so that kennel staff can clearly communicate with him. This also provides a sense of stability for him when he sees that they can "speak his language" by asking for behaviors such as sit, down, or wait.
- Continually expose your dog to the world around him. The more new experiences your dog encounters throughout his life, the easier it will be for him to acclimate to the environmental change of being in a kennel.
- Arrange for a "test run" at your facility of choice. It's worth paying for an overnight trial that may reveal any potential issues before you're actually out of town.
- Avoid dietary changes in the days prior to boarding. Clients often worry that their pet will lose weight while kenneled and as a result, over-feed or add extra "treats" to the diet in the

days leading up to kenneling. The added food combined with the initial stress of boarding often leads to digestive upset. For similar reasons, Gibson recommends that dogs arrive with an empty stomach.

- Whenever possible, try to avoid contact with other dogs for 7 to 10 days prior to boarding. This helps prevent the possibility of exposure to disease which could then be introduced into the kennel environment.
- When leaving your dog, avoid dramatic displays. Your intense emotions create undue stress for your dog.
- Be upfront and honest about your dog's habits and quirks. Says Gibson, "I want you to think of me as a friend. I care about your dog. I need you to be open with me. If your dog's a digger, tell me. If he's prone to chewing, tell me. When I know more about him, I can provide better care."
- And we'd like to add: Make sure your dog has at least one, and preferably more, forms of ID when you're away from home. At a minimum, his collar should have an up-to-date, well-secured tag. He should also be implanted with a properly registered microchip ID or tattooed with information that can quickly lead a rescuer to you.

at petcareservices.org. Member facilities may also opt to pursue volunteer PCSA accreditation through the Voluntary Facilities Accreditation (VFA) program.

In order to be considered for accreditation, facilities must be in business for a minimum of six months, must submit a detailed binder of information documenting all of their business and pet care practices and demonstrating that they meet the standards set forth by PCSA, and must pass an on-site inspection. It's a comprehensive process that takes an average of six months to complete. Facilities are subject to random inspections throughout the year and must repeat the accreditation process every three years.

In addition to professional trade organizations, pet owners are wise to look for membership in local Chambers of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau. The more ways in which a professional's reputation may be on the line, the greater the chance he will do everything in his power to ensure a successful boarding experience for his clients.

While professional and civic memberships demonstrate a certain level of professionalism on the part of the business owner, pet owners should not rely on memberships alone. Once you've verified that your prospective pet sitter or boarding kennel is in compliance with local regulations and adheres to a set of professional ethics and practice standards, there's still much research to be done!

■ **Staff requirements and training.** In any business, a well-trained, competent staff is critical to success. In the kennel industry, a well-trained and competent staff is what ensures the health and safety of your pet. A love of dogs or distaste for retail work isn't an adequate job qualification! Kindness, patience, compassion, and an ability to keep one's own emotions in check are all important traits that must be combined with a solid understanding of dog behavior and a natural ability with dogs. This is critical in facilities that allow dog-to-dog interaction among guests.

Ask how employees are trained and how much (if any) continuing education is required. Laurie Zurborg, owner of Wags and Wiggles in Tustin, California, requires that all new employees undergo comprehensive in-house training and that *all* employees participate in retraining every six months. Wags and Wiggles is a daycare facility that provides boarding for

clients, so it's imperative that facility staff be especially skilled in the often subtle nuances of dog body language – such as facial expressions and body posture; how to recognize, prevent, and interrupt bullying; and how to safely break up a dog fight.

Wags and Wiggles also requires that any staff member who interacts with a dog in a training capacity (often available in boarding kennels as an add-on service) should be certified by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. Unless you board your dog at your usual, familiar trainer's facility, we suggest that you not authorize training during boarding, unless you have taken the time to thoroughly screen the trainer and her methods.

■ **Where are dogs housed?** When it comes to professional boarding kennels, accommodations come, literally, in all shapes and sizes. Kennels range from high-volume, no-frills facilities with the ability to house upward of 150 dogs to smaller, boutique-style kennels housing a very limited number of dogs – and everything in between!

When choosing a kennel, be sure to make arrangements to visit far in advance. Don't be surprised if the facility requires that you schedule your visit or only visit during certain hours rather than simply popping in unannounced. Barb Gibson, owner of The Pawmer House Pet Hotel in Wilton Center, Illinois, explains that for her, preventing random visitors is all about

reducing stress and ensuring the safety of the dogs in her care. Guests at The Pawmer House participate in mandatory "quiet time" from 11:30 am to 2:00 pm and for at least one hour after each meal.

Unless there's an emergency, no one is allowed inside the kennel area during quiet time. The arrival of a human in the kennel area – especially a new human – sets off a cacophony of barking. Limiting such outbursts is an important part of managing the overall stress level of the dogs. Gibson also advises visitors to be prepared to wait if arriving unannounced because staff may be busy tending to the needs of the dogs, and the needs of the dogs come first.

When visiting a facility, pay attention to the area where your dog will be housed. Is it secure? How tall is the fencing? Are at least some of the kennels enclosed on the top to prevent jumpers and climbers from escaping? Is it clean? How is it sanitized? Does it smell? If housed in kennel runs, can the dogs directly see other dogs on either side and across from them?

If the enclosure has no direct access to an outdoor potty area, ask how frequently dogs are taken outside or if they're expected to eliminate in the enclosure. If the latter, how quickly are messes cleaned up and where is the dog during the process? What, if any, "comforts" are provided (such as beds, blankets, toys, and chews) and how are they sanitized between dogs? What personal items are allowed from home? Does the kennel require that all

Cage Free or Not Cage Free?

The idea of "cage free" boarding sounds nice! And for some dogs, it can help take the emotional sting out of being left behind for their owner's vacation. However, it may not be in the best interest of *your* dog. Not all dogs enjoy the company of other dogs, and asking your dog to endure the constant presence of his peers – for an extended period of time, and in a confined space – can quickly become stressful.

Additionally, dogs who spend 24 hours a day interacting with other dogs spend a tremendous amount of time in an aroused state. Even the "happy arousal" that results from good, clean play can take an emotional and physical toll on a dog over time. For most dogs, as their level of tiredness increases, their tolerance decreases, making them more prone to scuffles or even full-blown fights with other dogs. This ongoing emotional and physical stress frequently manifests as loose stools, extreme physical exhaustion, and a variety of behavior problems.

If considering a cage-free facility, be sure to spend time watching the way dogs interact and are managed. Find out if dogs receive any structured down time and how personality conflicts between dogs are handled. If the dogs are expected to co-exist 24/7, how much supervision is provided, and what is the skill level of the staff? What about overnight? In a cage-free setting, much skilled management can be needed to prevent a canine version of *Lord of the Flies!*

“Red Flags” on a Tour of a Boarding Facility

If you experience the following, experts agree that you should run – don’t walk – to another facility!

- You aren’t allowed to see where your pet will be housed. Some facilities cite insurance reasons for keeping owners out of the kennel area, but at a minimum, you should be allowed to look through a door or window and see the area where your pet will stay.
- Dirty facility. Pet messes should be cleaned up promptly and adequate air circulation (necessary for the good health of your pet) should prevent an overall “doggy” smell. In general, the facility should appear neat and clean and should not have an unpleasant odor.
- Inattentive staff. Their top priority should be the dogs. It’s a bad sign if the one person watching a play group of dogs is suddenly the same person giving you a tour of the facility!
- Excessive barking. It’s reasonable to expect bursts of barking when a human or dog travels through the kennel area. Continued barking likely points toward a bigger problem such as lack of exercise, lack of mental stimulation, inadequate potty opportunities, or an overall high stress/anxiety level.
- Inappropriate handling, such as physical or shouted “corrections.” Experienced, well-educated dog handlers don’t need to hit or “alpha-roll” dogs, ever.

guests eat a facility-provided kibble, or can owners bring their pet’s food from home? Will the kennel accommodate special diets such as home-cooked meals or raw food?

It’s also important to know in advance what vaccinations are required, how they need to be documented and what, if any, exceptions exist. As thoughts regarding vaccination evolve, many kennels now accept titers or statements of vaccine exclusion from a veterinarian in lieu of following a strict vaccination protocol.

■ **Well-managed dog play groups.** Many kennels offer the option of recreational play groups. When considering this option, find out how guests are screened to determine their eligibility for play groups. As with day care and cage-free facilities, play groups must be closely supervised at all times by well-trained staff.

How large are the play groups? How are play pals selected? How much time do dogs spend engaged in off-leash play? What is the procedure for breaking up a dog fight and how are dogs handled immediately following, as well as for the duration of their stay? Are owners notified? If you don’t wish for your dog to participate in a play group, how will your dog be exercised?

■ **Emergency plans.** Accidents happen and an emergency can strike at any time. Make sure the facility has detailed emergency plans in place. Can they safely evacuate guests in the event of a natural disaster? Where are the animals evacuated to? Are client records backed up off-site so that owners can be notified of an evacuation should the facility be compromised? Seventeen dogs were killed when a propane tank exploded at a boarding facility in Pennsylvania in March

2009 (including Martha Stewart’s Chow Chow), and several others were injured or temporarily lost after fleeing in a panic. Many client files were destroyed in the fire, making it difficult to notify owners about the emergency.

Every kennel should maintain excellent working relationships with local veterinarians and 24-hour care facilities. Find out how emergencies or potential emergencies are handled. When vet care is needed, are owners contacted ahead of time? For minor issues, how is the need for vet care decided and by whom? You should feel comfortable knowing that medical issues will be promptly addressed without sending your dog to an after-hours emergency facility at the first sign of soft stool.

Go with your gut

Once you’ve done your homework and thoroughly checked out your list of potential facilities, often the best way to make a selection is to go with your gut instinct. If deciding between two different facilities that seem equal in terms of experience and standards of care, ask yourself if one just simply feels better? On the other hand, if for any reason you feel uncomfortable with a facility, regardless of its memberships or glowing recommendations, trust yourself and your ability to know what’s best for your pet. 🐾

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Bad Experience With a Kennel?

Should you have a bad experience with a boarding kennel, Pet Care Services Association’s Charlotte Biggs recommends the following course of action:

- Notify the facility manager and/or owner and ask for an explanation. Communication is important.
- Consider taking your dog to the vet so that he can corroborate and document any physical evidence such as injuries or extreme weight loss/gain.
- Contact Pet Care Services Association at (877) 570-7788 to file a report. All complaints against PCSA member facilities are thoroughly investigated by the Ethics Committee.
- Contact your local Better Business Bureau.