

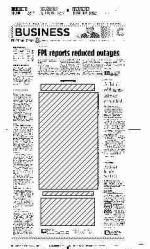
## BALANCING ACT

# HAPPY TAILS



MARSHA HALPER/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**DOGGIE DAY CARE:** Dr. Jackie Weisbein gets a hug from Lambchop, her Great Dane. She leaves him at Bark Avenue in Hollywood when she's working.



## As pets continue to be a big part of some workers' lives an industry of critter sitters keeps tails wagging

**A**s a physician, Jackie Weisbein often gets hung up at the hospital. She used to stress about it, worrying that her 2-year-old Great Dane, Lambchop, was home waiting to be taken on a walk.

Weisbein says it is impossible to tell anyone at work she has to get home for her dog. "Animals don't have the same pull of a child at home with a baby-sitter that needs to be relieved."

For workers like Weisbein, pets are a big part of their lives. It's the balance issue many fear raising with the boss. Traveling on a moment's notice, working extended hours and an unexpected deadline can send a pet owner frantically searching for back up care.



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Some owners even feel forced to hide their true reason for leaving early or for coming in late when a pet is sick. And, as dog owner Debbie Larch, a Plantation hairstylist points out, "We have the same guilt parents have for spending long hours away."

Today, 63 percent of households own a pet, up from 56 percent two decades ago, and most consider their pet like a child or other family member. The trend is giving way to a budding industry of pet sitters, dog walkers and doggie day cares aimed at helping workers hold jobs and keep Fido cared for and happy. Two national professional associations, Pet Sitters Interna-

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tional and the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters have a combined membership of more than 8,400.

Cat owners use sitters for feeding, playing and changing the litter box. Dog owners use them for walking and feeding and some use full-time dog day care, complete with play groups, snacks, leash walks and rest time. And of course, there's boarding for overnight needs and taxi service to take pets to the vet or groomer.

Indeed, it was software guru Paul Mann's unpredictable travel schedule and the scramble to find a sitter for his dog and two cats that led him six years ago to start Fetch! Pet Care, a national provider of pet services. "I had exhausted my list of family and friends" to call in a pinch, he says. Mann says he gets most of his service requests during the 8-to-5 work day, "when people realize the need." Companies such as Yahoo, Oracle and Fox News have signed on with his national pet sitting service to offer discounted rates as a perk to employees.

For now, the cost for pet sitting and walking services still lags child care. It ranges from \$18 to \$25 a day, compared with up to \$80 a day for child care. But industry

experts have found regardless of the economy pet owners will spend money on their animals. Those who don't, often pay the price — stressed-out pets that act out.

Jessica Weiss, an elementary school teacher, cuts back on her clothing and food budget to afford a \$20-a-day dog walker for her Yorkie, named Bentley. "I don't live close enough to go home and come back. It's a small dog that really needs to go out." On Fridays, she cuts the expense and bolts home to Bentley. "It's the only day I know I will be able to leave on time."

But Weiss offers this caution to pet owners: screen carefully. She now uses Fetch! Pet Care Miami, a licensed and bonded business. She discovered a prior dog walker had been showering and doing laundry in her home.

Weisbein, the physician, prefers doggie day care to in-home services. She packs Lambchop's lunchbox and drops him at Bark Avenue in Hollywood before making her hour commute. Owner Paul Funt says he is open 7 till 7 to accommodate customers who leave for work early and stay late, many who also commute to another county.

Just like many day cares, Funt has a puppy cam for

working owners to watch their pets at play from their office cubicles. "It's like he is in recess all day while I'm at work," Weisbein says.

Dog nannies, made popular by celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Paris Hilton, are another route well-heeled pet owners can take. Like their human counterparts, dog nannies usually spend the entire day with the animal.

Still, others prefer to work at home with their pets. Heather Galler founded her company, JobKite.com, where workers are encouraged to telecommute from home and be with their pets. Other employers welcome pets into the workplace, either on an occasional or regular basis.

Sharon Livingston, president of a market research firm, brings her dog, Stewie to work with her every day. She allows her employees to do the same. At one time, the office animals included two dogs, a cat and a bird. "Employees feel a lot more comfortable working when they are not worrying about their pet at home," Livingston says. "It creates a fun office experience."

*Send your comments and ideas to Cindy Krischer Goodman at [cgoodman@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:cgoodman@MiamiHerald.com).*



MARCIA FREIDENREICH/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

**WOOF, WOOF:** Ron Funt, left, co-owner of Bark Avenue, tends to his clients. At right is Sharon Livingston, who brings her pooch Stewie to work with her every day.

## PET HELP

### When selecting a pet sitter:

- Ask whether he or she is insured and bonded.
- Get references and/or ask your vet for a recommendation.
- Introduce the sitter to your pet before you leave to ensure they are compatible.
- If you use a pet sitting service, ask how applicants are screened for employment.
- Locate a pet sitter in your area at [petsit.com](http://petsit.com).

### When selecting a pet day care:

- Ask which vaccines are required.
- Ask about staff turnover.
- Check for cleanliness.

Source: Pet Sitters International