



## A new kind of sitter ...

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**By Shannon Farr**

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Sixty-three percent of U.S. households have a pet. That's over 71 million homes nationwide, according to the 2007-2008 National Pet Owners Survey.

With the summer season under way, pet owners are deciding where their pets will stay while they are on vacation.

More pet owners are deciding to leave their pets at home and have someone come in, either visiting the pet a few times each day or staying in the home full time while they are on vacation, said Stephanie Shain, spokeswoman with the Humane Society of the United States.

"It's nice to have someone come over, pay attention to the dog, and take her out," said David Allison, 46, of Mt. Pleasant. He hires a pet sitter when he is out of town.

U.S. households are predicted to spend more than \$3 billion dollars this year on dog grooming and boarding services, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers' Association. And the American Automobile Association reports that more than 41 million Americans traveled during the first week of July 2007.

"We're so busy, we can't even take anymore customers," said Bob Hewlett, owner of Hewlett's Pet Care, located in Bovard. "It used to be just in the summertime, but now we're busy the rest of the year."

Hewlett said he and his wife, Kim, have been pet sitting for over 17 years.

Pet sitter Shelly LaQuatra said her business, Shelly's Home Alone Pet Services, located in Harrison City, has experienced a 20 percent increase in clientele this summer.

Choice Hotels is competing with pet sitters and kennels by offering over 2,500 pet-friendly locations nationwide, for an additional \$25 a night, said Rocco Loverro, spokesman for Choice Hotels International.

"Even with pet-friendly hotels, people may find themselves confined to certain activities," said John Long, spokesman for Pet Sitters International. "There are professional pet sitters available who will spend time with the pet in the hotel room."

If pets are going to spend most of their time sitting in a hotel room by themselves they'd be happier at home, Shain said.

Allowing pets to stay at home avoids the stress of a long car or airplane ride, maintains their regular feeding and exercise schedule, and deters the possibility of illness or undue stress, said Felicia Lembesis, spokeswoman from the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters.

Many pets require home care because they have physical limitations or other ailments, said Mylyssa Flagg, 19, owner of Petite Feet Pet Care, a new pet sitting service that travels to Westmoreland and Fayette counties. Flagg said she owns 3 dogs, 2 cats, a ferret and a mouse.

Flagg takes care of Allison's dog, Saddle, while his family is at work and on vacations. Saddle, a 13-year-old German Shepherd has hip dysplasia.

"I take her down to Greenlick to go swimming," Flagg said. "It helps to loosen up her muscles."

Flagg also takes care of Herby, a 15-year-old tabby cat suffering from kidney failure. She said she feeds Herby through a syringe so he won't get dehydrated.

Another benefit of pet sitting is that the animals are bathed with their own products, Flagg said. She provides and cleans the towels she uses to dry the animals.

"It's completely hassle free for my clients, so they can have a clean dog and not have to worry about it," Flagg said.

Most pet sitting services in Fayette County charge an estimated \$15 per visit to the home and offer other services, such as a \$20, 20-minute pet massage, a \$20 dog walk, and a \$15 car ride to the veterinarian.

The prices at nearby kennels are comparable. However, Paul Mann, spokesman of Fetch! Pet Care Inc., a provider of professional in-home pet sitting and dog walking services, said kennels contain many health hazards.

In kennels, animals risk contracting kennel cough, being confined in cages, and getting picked on by another dog, Mann said. "We have found that pets are happier and healthier in the home."

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