



### Therapy Dogs Team Up With San Diego Ambassadors

San Diego International Airport is going to the dogs – all thanks to the travels of one volunteer of Travelers Aid Society of San Diego.

Last Thanksgiving, Travelers Aid, which runs the airport's ambassador

#### Airport Sector

program, introduced the Ready Pet Go program, which bring trained therapy dogs and handlers into the airport to help relieve the stress of travelers facing flight delays or pre-flight jitters.

Travelers Aid participates in a program organized by Wyoming-based Therapy Dogs. There is no cost to the airport or Travelers Aid to join this network of 12,000 handler/dog teams in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

There are now 14 dog owners participating with 17 dogs in the San Diego program. Each handler under goes a background and fingerprint check because they will be working post-security. The dog handlers are paired with existing Travelers Aid volunteers to guide them through the airport.

The Travelers Aid volunteer is there to answer any airport-related questions as well to alert the handler of any police agency or service animals in the area as they try to keep the dogs separate. The local police, Transportation Security Administration and the Drug



Enforcement Administration all use trained dogs within the airport.

The teams encourage the interaction with the therapy dogs, explaining that purpose is to relieve the stress. The dogs wear vests inviting travelers to “pet me.”

Each trainer and dog team volunteer at a minimum twice a month, but many do so weekly.

The program uses a variety of breeds including Shih Tzu, Beagle, Pekinese, Golden Retriever, Goldendoodle, Rottweiler, Westie, Huskie and a terrier mix.

The dogs not only relieve the stress of the travelers, but also the airport employees, airline staffers and TSA agents, according to feedback that Travelers Aid has received.

The program began at San Diego after a Travelers Aid volunteer encountered a similar program while

passing through the Reno airport. They later learned that Los Angeles International Airport also had a pet therapy program. Both Reno and LAX use the Wyoming firm to provide the dogs and handlers.

Travelers Aid San Diego has a contract to provide the volunteer ambassadors at the airport and the airport approved the pet therapy programs with the stipulation that Therapy Dogs maintain a substantial insurance policy on each dog/handler team.

Gina Bernsen, Travelers Aid's Director of Visitor Services at the airport, manages the program.

Travelers Aid has more than 300 volunteers working at the airport.★

