



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hand in Paw Celebrates 25 Years of Service and Announces Plans to Return to In-Person Visits

BIRMINGHAM, AL: On Friday, May 14, 2021, Hand in Paw celebrated 25 years of providing Animal-Assisted Therapy to North Central Alabama and Tuscaloosa. During this time of celebration, Hand in Paw is excited to announce their plans to safely return to in-person therapeutic visits.

In 1996, Beth Franklin struck out on a mission to design and build an organization that would improve people's lives through Animal-Assisted Therapy. At this time, Animal-Assisted Therapy existed on a very limited number of radar screens and certainly wasn't being used in Birmingham, Alabama. Beth and her rescued "Peke-a-Poo" Jessica had their first visit at UAB Comprehensive Care Center and, along with other volunteer handler and animal Therapy Teams, quickly became a familiar sight in area hospitals, schools, nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities.

Thanks to the dedication of Hand in Paw volunteers, donors and staff, the Animal-Assisted Therapy nonprofit has grown in many ways over the past 25 years. Today, Hand in Paw has over 70 Program Partners and 100 Therapy Teams bringing comfort and joy to people in need across North Central Alabama as well as Tuscaloosa!

Hand in Paw Therapy Teams are trained in a state-of-the-art facility that was renovated and expanded in 2019 thanks to a \$2 Million Capital Campaign. Their expanded campus enables the organization to train more potential Therapy Teams and thus meet more of the community's demand for its unique programs and services. The campus is also utilized for service projects, educational events, volunteer orientations and more.

During their early years, Hand in Paw focused on serving children by making therapeutic visits in facilities such as Children's Hospital of Alabama and Glenwood INC. Fast-forward 25 years and the nonprofit now achieves its mission to improve human health and well-being through Animal-Assisted Therapy by offering beneficial programs to people of all ages across 3 main program areas: HIP Heals, which focuses on mental health, wellness and compassion; HIP Reads, which focuses on education, literacy and special education; and HIP Cares, which focuses on life skills, mentoring and animal advocacy.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hand in Paw had to adapt the way they deliver their Animal-Assisted Therapy programs by transitioning to virtual visits and creating a new type of Therapy Team: the TeleHIP Therapy Team. These teams spread positivity, ease stress and stay connected with their Program Partners online via video conferencing tools.

“Hand in Paw volunteers and staff discovered opportunity in the challenges of the pandemic. Understanding the isolation and loneliness of our community, Therapy Teams embraced technology and learned to serve in creative and interesting ways. Program Partners like Children’s Hospital, UAB, the Exceptional Foundation, Glenwood and Girls, Inc. collaborated with Hand in Paw to develop new ways of providing therapeutic support and educational experiences. Many schools welcomed Therapy Teams to work with struggling readers and life skill-oriented classrooms. It has been a time of ‘coming together’ for teachers, health-care workers and volunteers,” says Margaret Stinnett, Executive Director.

As COVID-19 vaccines become more available, and with the support and wisdom from their Board of Directors, Hand in Paw is excited to announce their plans to safely return to in-person visits after their long ‘paws’! The process will begin slowly as they host small, socially-distanced Therapy Team refresher courses which introduce new health and safety visit-protocol. Hand in Paw will be working closely with their Program Partners to ensure volunteer, staff and client safety. As the nonprofit moves forward carefully, they remain dedicated to helping the community heal through the goodness of Animal-Assisted Therapy.

“Reflecting over the past 25 years, I am filled with gratitude for those who generously supported the organization’s growth through their time, talent and treasure. Our therapy teams shifted to virtual visits during Covid-19 and are preparing for a return to in-person visits. There is a huge need for these teams to help those who have suffered so many losses and we are eager to be part of their healing,” says Beth Franklin, Founder.

Hand in Paw is thankful for the generosity of their donors, the dedication of their volunteers and the collaboration with their Program Partners who have allowed Hand in Paw to serve the community for 25 amazing years. To donate in honor of their 25th anniversary and to help Hand in Paw continue to grow and transition back to in-person visits, please consider making a donation online at handinpaw.org/donate.

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ABOUT HAND IN PAW

With a mission to improve human health & well-being, Hand in Paw is Alabama’s premier Animal-Assisted Therapy provider and Animal Advocacy Organization. Hand in Paw’s professionally-trained volunteer handler and animal Therapy Teams help improve people’s day to day lives in several medical centers, schools, and human service organizations throughout North Central Alabama and Tuscaloosa. Our volunteer teams make thousands of beneficial visits through community events and participating facilities each year, helping countless children with special needs, at-risk youth, struggling students, and people with chronic and terminal illnesses. At no time has Hand in Paw charged for its services. For more information, visit www.handinpaw.org.