

Walks, Plus: Pet-sitting growing, and is more than basic care

By Linda Lombardi
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Gabe Schneider of Silver Spring, Md., gives Jake, a year-old Labrador retriever, what he wants - a lift getting into the car.

(AP Photo)

SILVER SPRING, Md.

Walking a dog on a beautiful day, playing with kittens - for money. Sound better than the job you have now?

Whether you're interested in working for an established company or starting out on your own, pet-sitting is a growing business. Combined membership in two major professional pet-sitters associations doubled between 1999 and 2005, according to David Lummis, a senior pet-market analyst with market-research firm Packaged Facts. Part of a much bigger picture, consumers spent \$4.73 billion on non-veterinary pet-care services, including pet-sitting, last year, or 32 percent more than they did in 2001, he said.

Those in the industry say that people see their pets more as family members these days. They need extra care while their humans lead busier lives, and they need more than just a kennel when the people go on vacation.

Jaime Deason started a Fetch! pet-sitting franchise in Silver Spring partly because she had trouble getting quality care for her own dog and cat.

"We struggled to find people who were reliable enough," she said, and it was difficult to accommodate last-minute changes in their complicated schedule.

Gabe Schneider of Silver Spring, Md., works for Deason's pet-sitting service. "It's always different, not the set nine-to-five," said Schneider, 21. "It's always something new."

On a recent Thursday, Schneider's first two assignments went from one extreme to the other.

The day started with Jake, a yellow Labrador retriever who's just a year old and full of energy. Schneider's job is to take him out for an hour "and tire him out."

Jake runs out of the house with Schneider with great enthusiasm. But his attitude changes when he sees the open back of the car: He doesn't want to jump in.

He sits, lies down, hangs out, and does everything but get into the car despite Schneider's repeated coaxing.

After a while Jake wins the battle - as he knew he would - and Schneider gives up and lifts the nearly full grown retriever into the back of the van.

They drive to Rock Creek Park, where they walk, play fetch, and greet some other dogs who stroll by. Then, best of all for a retriever, Jake goes for a swim in the creek. Now the job is done, and Jake is tired out. After watching the dog put on a great show of exhaustion, Schneider has no choice but to pick him up again.

Schneider's next visit is to Pepper, a 17-year-old cockapoo.

Pepper also needs to be carried, but he is blind and deaf. With his stiff legs, he can't walk down stairs anymore.

Schneider carries Pepper out of the house, puts him on the ground gently and guides him up and down the block.

Pepper can take only a five-minute walk but must appreciate the visits anyway - Schneider sometimes rescues him from such situations as the time he was stuck in the corner of a room, unable to find his way out.

Dealing with such special needs is not uncommon - one client has a cat with diabetes that needs an injection exactly every 12 hours.

It's not always easy, but it's part of the job. Deason says her sitters are "people who are going to go out of their way to take care of people's pets."