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HEADING out of town for the weekend or planning a Christmas getaway?

For pet owners, figuring out what to do with your animal while you're away can be a difficult dilemma.

Many pets prefer to stay in familiar surroundings and become stressed when taken to a kennel. But you may not want to continually impose on family and friends (especially if you are a frequent traveller) to stay at your home or drop by to feed your pet while you are away.

That's why a pet sitter is often an ideal alternative.

Pet sitters are professional babysitters for your animal. They visit your house (as many times a day as you request) and feed, water, play with and walk your pet. Your animal gets to stay in the comfort of its own home, and you have the peace of mind that comes from knowing that a professional caregiver is looking after it.

"With a pet sitter, your animal gets individual attention and can stick to their daily routines," says **Karin Howland** who runs **Pets Stay Home -- Pet Sitting Plus** here in Winnipeg and also serves as coordinator of the Winnipeg Professional Pet Sitters Network and western representative for the All Canadian Pet Services Network, two organizations that help define professional standards for pet sitting.

As well, she points out, if you use the same pet sitter continuously, your animal will develop a bond with this person and welcome the visits. As a bonus, pet sitters can take in the mail and water your plants, and you have the security of knowing someone is checking on your home daily, which is a good deterrent for criminals. Howland has taken care of birds, fish, hamsters, gerbils and dogs and cats. In addition to looking after pets while their owners are away, she is also hired by people who work long hours and want their dog to have a midday outdoor break and walk. She also provides many pet services for seniors who are no longer able to take care of their animal on their own.

Prices for pet sitters vary from \$12 to \$25 per visit, depending on how many days you book for, the number of pets, the services requested and the experience of the pet sitter. Be wary of pet sitters who charge under \$12, Howland adds, as they are likely not insured if they can afford to charge such low rates.

And don't just pick a pet sitter out of the phone book and hire him or her on the spot. "You have to do due diligence," says Howland, pointing out that you need to make sure the person you are hiring is professional and dependable and will take good care of your animal and home.

Before hiring a pet sitter, you should find out as much as you can about them and their service, have an initial meeting, and see how they interact with your pet.

Here are some questions Howland suggests you ask potential pet sitter before hiring:

*** Are they insured and bonded?**

Your pet sitter should have "care, custody and control" insurance (available only through registered pet sitting organizations), which covers any costs resulting from accidents or injuries sustained by your pet or any damage to your property while in the pet sitter's care. So, for example, if your dog is hurt while on a walk in the park, all medical bills are covered.

*** Are they a member of any pet-sitting organizations such as Pet Sitters International or All Canadian Pet Services Network?** As pet sitting is not regulated, these organizations assist by defining professional standards for their members and offering training.

*** Do they know pet first aid?**

*** Is their business registered?**

All Winnipeg companies must have a business licence to operate.

*** What is their experience as a pet sitter (how many years, how many clients, etc.)?**

*** How and where do they store house keys (i.e. are keys stored separately from the file containing your address, in case the pet sitter's office is broken into)?**

*** What is their emergency plan if they are sick/injured and can't make it to your home (do they have backup)? What is their plan if something happens to your pet?**

*** Can they give you any references to call?**