



# NEDA

National End-of-Life Doula Alliance



## **NEDA News**

**A Forum for Encouragement and Exchange**  
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## Member Spotlight

### *What it means to be a Companion Animal Doula*

by Angela Shook

I was first drawn to companion animal doula work in 2020. After becoming a doula and working in the end-of-life field for a few years, I found that I wanted to expand my doula toolbox and enrolled in the Companion Animal Course at the University of Vermont. In addition to growing my doula skills, I knew that my elderly Maltese, Bella, would need more support as time went by; and I knew that I would need to prepare myself for her eventual death. Since then, I have begun instructing that course and have partnered with a local mobile vet in my area. Together, we help to support families as they make the difficult decisions that come at their pets' last days, as well as, to provide grief support as needed. Companioning these beautiful creatures and their loved ones has been so fulfilling and so very precious to me. These experiences also helped me give Bella the best possible care for her remaining time with me. Sadly, Bella died last August and although my heart continues to ache, the knowledge gained through doing animal doula work has done so much to bring me comfort; and afforded me the experience and learnings to support others.



What are some of those learnings?

The human animal bond is an ancient, mutually beneficial relationship that has evolved over time from animals serving as herders, hunters, and guards into loving companions. Humans provide the animal's basic needs for survival and are rewarded with many therapeutic benefits that positively affect their psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being. Pets are often seen as family members and are welcomed into our homes—and often even into our beds! We may even place more value on our relationship with an animal than on other human relationships in our lives. We share our daily routine, intimate details of our lives, and most secret selves with our pets; and they become an important part of our self-identity. This loving relationship is sacred and often there is a spiritual or soul connection between the two. By gazing into each other's eyes and learning to communicate without words, an intimate and trusting bond is forged.

Because our animals mean so much to us, their deaths can be emotionally devastating. Just as an end-of-life doula serves those nearing death, and those who love them, there is space for companion animal doulas to provide non-medical comfort and support to these special animals and their caretakers, as well.

Nearly 66% of households in the United States have welcomed pets into their lives, hearts, and families. Yet, there is still little acknowledgement of the deep grief that a pet owner feels at their loss. Their feelings are often dismissed as not as intense as those felt with the loss of a human being. Pet owners may be told: "It's just a dog, you can always get another one." Or, "At least they are no longer suffering." They may be told that they are overreacting and that their feelings are not normal. Workplaces and schools do not offer bereavement leave when a pet dies. Overall, there is little understanding and support offered to those facing pet loss and grief. When there is great attachment to an animal but lack of acknowledgement of that bond, grief is intensified. This is when support is most needed, and appreciated.

Learning more about our beloved companion animals and serving them at their end-of-life had been a lovely addition to my doula work. Since 2022, I have assisted with nearly 200 euthanasia appointments and supported even more families through their grief. Currently, there is a lot of interest and growth in this field. I have found that there are many thorough and interesting educational opportunities to learn more about animal end-of-life support including those from the Animal Hospice Group, the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care, and the Association for Pet Loss Bereavement. In addition to the Companion Animal Doula course at UVM, International Doula Life Movement, Death Wives and the Centre for Sacred Deathcare also offer wonderful pet-focused trainings and workshops.

There are multiple ways to begin doing this work. Whether in a volunteer capacity, self-employment, or working with an existing doula business. Below is a list of potential opportunities for Companion Animal Doulas.

- Contact local veterinarians and vet clinics. Remember to research mobile vets as well.
- Offer your services to shelters, humane societies and other rescue groups.
- Share your information with service and therapy animal trainers and organizations.
- Host community educational sessions and pet loss grief support groups
- Network with groomers, pet supply store owners, trainers, breeders, animal sitters, and other animal care providers.

Together, we can support more animals and their families and help increase awareness of this role and service.



Angela is a past president of NEDA and an instructor for the University of Vermont's End-of-Life Doula and Companion Animal Doula certificate programs. She is the co-author of the recently released book: *The Doula Tool Kit: The Complete Practical Guide for End-of-Life Doulas & Caregivers*. To find out more about Angela or contact her, please visit [www.angela-hook.com](http://www.angela-hook.com).