



Assistance Dogs International Conference

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Promoting justice through the use of well-trained dogs to provide emotional support for everyone in our criminal justice system



The inspiration for the Courthouse Dogs program is Ellen's son Sean and his skilled companion Jeeter. Although neither of them can speak, they have the ability to bring out the best in nearly everyone they meet. One day a week Jeeter could not accompany Sean on his outings so Ellen brought Jeeter to work with her at Juvenile Drug Court to comfort drug addicted teenagers in recovery. Soon thereafter, Jeeter began working with children who had been sexually abused. He was such a success that the Office of the King County Prosecuting applied for their own facility dog from Canine Companions for Independence.

In 2004 Ellie was the first professionally trained assistance dog to be placed in a prosecutor's office. Her handler is Senior Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Page Ulrey.

Although Ellie and Jeeter provide emotional support to anyone in need in the criminal justice system, they specialize in assisting crime victims and people with substance abuse problems and mental health issues.





Assistance Dogs and Crime Victims and Witnesses

People who have been victims of crimes of violence or sexual assault are often in acute emotional distress during a police investigation, preparation for trial and when testifying in court. This is especially true for children, the elderly and people with developmental disabilities.

In a forensic interview, children who have been physically or sexually abused or who have witnessed crimes of violence are asked to tell a trained professional about what happened to them. Some children as young as 4 years of age have to go through this process. Many of them are frightened or very reluctant to describe what occurred. Before beginning the interview process, they show the children the commands they can perform (they call them tricks) and encourage the children to ask the dog to sit or shake. This often gives the children a sense of being more in control of what is happening to them. Dogs that perform this work must be very calm once they lie beside the child in the interview room. It is important that they don't do anything to distract the child during this process. It is much easier for the children to speak while they pet a dog.



During one session, a five year old boy described how his father brutally beat his mother. Ellie put her head on his lap when he struggled for words. Then he exclaimed, "See Ellie loves me." Before the boy met Ellie he could not talk to police and prosecutors about what he had seen. Ellie made that possible.



It is difficult for a child to testify in court. It is equally hard for parents to watch their child go through this process. However the presence of an assistance dog during this time can decrease this trauma. One mother described their experience by saying, "Jeeter helped all of us through the hardest time of our lives and we survived feeling a little less wounded and full of fond memories. Not many people can walk away from a situation like ours with warm feelings in our hearts."

Drug Courts



Drug Courts provide people with substance abuse problems who have committed non-violent felony offenses an opportunity to obtain drug treatment. Often defendants are brought to court within a day after they have been arrested for an offense. If they are interested in treatment they must agree to abide by the very strict rules of the program and if they successfully complete it, the felony charge against them will be dismissed. However, if they fail to comply with the program requirements then they will be terminated from the program and the judge will automatically find them guilty of the offense. A drug court team usually consists of the judge, the prosecutor, a defense attorney, treatment providers and counselors. They evaluate how well a participant is complying with the rules of the program.



Many drug court participants are also homeless, unemployed and have mental health issues. Drug court hearings are often stressful because recovery is often a very painful process. An assistance dog can provide a great deal of comfort to many people going through this process. It usually takes about two

years of intensive treatment for a drug court participant to graduate. However the time and effort is a good investment because many drug court graduates leave the program able to lead productive lives and are reunited with their families.



In Juvenile Drug Court teenagers often come from dysfunctional families and come to regard the Drug Court team as surrogate parents. Jeeter becomes a part of their family too.

Chelsea and Jeeter

Chelsea struggled to overcome her addiction to cocaine and methamphetamine. Despite two years of intensive treatment she relapsed and ran away from home.

After her arrest, the Drug Court team determined that they could do nothing more to assist her in her recovery and decided to terminate her from the program. This would mean that Chelsea would have several felony convictions on her record.

After she was arrested on a warrant, a guard brought a handcuffed Chelsea into the courtroom. She cried and was full of despair when she was told that she would be terminated and sentenced. Ellen knew that Chelsea was very fond of Jeeter and asked the judge for permission to allow them some time together before she was returned to her cell. The judge permitted this and Jeeter put his front paws on the table where Chelsea was seated. Chelsea buried her head in Jeeter's neck and burst into tears. After she composed herself she turned to the Drug Court team and said, "See, Jeeter believes in me, would you please give me another try. " They put their best judgment aside and agreed that she could have **one last chance**.

Thus began a very special partnership between a sixteen year old girl and a golden lab. Chelsea would come to Juvenile Court early so that she could help Ellen take Jeeter for a walk and groom him before court began. While she waited for her case to be called, the two of them sat beside one another in the back of the courtroom where she would pet him. Chelsea went

back to school, went to live with her father, engaged in treatment and remained sober. At last she met the requirements to graduate.

A local news station covered Chelsea's graduation ceremony and interviewed her about her relationship with the Drug Court dog. Then despite her promise to stay in touch, they never saw Chelsea again.

Four years later Jeeter and Ellen bumped into Chelsea. She was at the courthouse to pick up some paperwork. They had a joyous reunion and Ellen introduced Chelsea to Heather Pfeifer, a professor from the University of Baltimore, who was interviewing judges and lawyers about the courthouse dog program.

Chelsea now had a job, was still sober, crime free and living with her father and grandmother. When the professor asked about her experiences with Jeeter she simply said, "Jeeter saved my life."

Interest in Courthouse Dog Programs is Growing

As word of the effectiveness of highly-trained assistance dogs in the court system has spread, more and more jurisdictions are considering adding a professionally trained dog to their staff. After being introduced to a trained service or facility dog, child advocates, prosecutors and judges alike can intuitively grasp how a dog can help lower the tension level during a variety of courthouse proceedings, from plea negotiations to trials.

Not being familiar with the details of dog training, some jurisdictions have attempted to use volunteer-handled “therapy dogs”, registered with Delta Society and similar national organizations instead of investing the effort needed to acquire and integrate a professional facility dog. However, many therapy dogs have proved to be unsuitable for working in this emotionally charged setting. Because they must work on-leash with their volunteer owner/handler, they cannot be used in forensic interviews or other confidential settings where the handler would not be allowed. In addition few therapy dogs have the ability to maintain almost perfect control during a trial, where a misbehaving dog could be grounds for a mistrial or appeal.



Traditionally, facility dogs have been placed in hospitals, physical therapy clinics, nursing homes, and special education classrooms. Although their use in the criminal justice system is relatively new, the work that the facility dogs do in this setting provide relief from mental suffering for a large number of people, in much the same way that a facility dog working in a psychiatric hospital or an assisted care facility would do. Just as a person suffering from autism or Alzheimer's has some difficulty functioning normally, the same can be said for a child who has been violently abused or a person who is addicted to narcotics.

Because a dog working in the criminal justice system can encounter distractions ranging from loud, angry scenes in a hallway or people in acute emotional distress, a dog working in this environment should have a quiet, self confident and calm personality.

Public exposure for your organization



A dog working in the courthouse will increase community awareness of your organization. The dog will likely be seen every day by jurors, lawyers, judges, law enforcement officers, and members of the public. Not expecting to encounter such a well-behaved dog, they will be immediately impressed by the dog and his degree of training. This is a new population of individuals who have not generally been exposed to service dogs and this is a great opportunity to introduce people to your nonprofit. Television and newspaper reporters love to cover dog events such as “Bring Your Dog to Work Day” at the courthouse.

Please consider this courthouse setting for placement of your dogs. Within 5 or 10 years, courthouse dogs will be a common sight throughout the United States (and other countries); your dogs can be an important part of this movement.

For more information about courthouse dogs - www.courhousedogs.com

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