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Pound Puppies

The Rehabilitative Uses of Dogs in Correctional Facilities

By Todd Harkrader, Tod W. Burke and Stephen S. Owen

The Roots of Animal Therapy

The rehabilitative use of animals is not a new concept in today's medical and psychological fields. Florence Nightingale noted more than a century ago that patients suffering from long hospital stays relished the compassion and friendship that a pet could provide. One of the earliest accounts of pets being used for therapeutic reasons occurred at the York Center in Britain in 1792. However, physicians have just recently fully realized the benefits that animals can provide for patients.

One group that has experienced remarkable success with pets is the elderly. As people become older, they may return to a state of dependency. The elderly often feel as though they are unimportant; however, pets have a tendency to change this belief, providing the elderly with a sense of responsibility and self-importance. When introduced to severely depressed and lonely nursing home patients, pets have had a remarkable effect on the patients' attitudes toward life. Programs have begun to encourage this very response.

In addition, animals have even been shown to assist patients recovering from serious ailments. Having a pet around can lower the blood pressure of heart patients as well as increase the healing process. When studying the survival rates of 92 coronary patients, researchers found that 11 of 29 patients without pets died within a year after hospitalization. However, only three of the 53 who had pets died. Although several variables, such as stress at work and diets, were not accounted for in the researchers' study, there is clearly a correlation between caring for a pet and recovery from coronary ailments.

Animals also have been proved to have a profound effect on juvenile delinquents. A program using dogs to impact troubled juveniles called Project POOCH (positive Opportunities-Obvious Change With Hounds) began in 1993 at the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn, Ore. In Project POOCH, dogs from local humane societies are adopted by juvenile offenders. With the assistance of a teacher, the juveniles teach the dogs basic obedience skills before the dogs are adopted by families in the community. Staff have noticed that juveniles in the program have fewer referrals to the office, have more patience when interacting with others, demonstrate greater self-esteem and exhibit a higher level of responsibility. It should then come as no surprise that if dogs can have the aforementioned effects on the elderly, physically ill and juveniles, they could also have a strong impact on all types of inmates.

Puppies in Prisons

Three types of assistance dog training have become prevalent in correctional facilities seeking to implement rehabilitation programs - guide dog, hearing dog and service dog training. Guide dogs are used to aid the visually impaired, such as individuals who are blind or partially blind; hearing dogs provide aid to the deaf and hearing impaired; and service dogs provide assistance to individuals suffering from physical disabilities that restrict or impair movement such as individuals who are partially paralyzed or prone to seizures. In addition, there are programs, such as Nevada's Pups Up for Parole, which, like many programs of its type, take animals who would otherwise be euthanized and give them to inmates, who train them in basic obedience skills so they will be more adoptable by families.

According to *The Boston Globe* article, "Wagging Tails Cool Prison Tempers: Maine Inmates Find Calm in Training Dogs," by Donna Gold, the concept of placing dogs in prisons with inmates came from Sister Pauline Quinn, a Dominican nun who established the first inmate dog-training program in Washington in 1981 to help spread the joy of dogs to inmates. Her brainchild has spawned numerous programs in prisons to train dogs to help people with all types of disabilities.

The concept of inmate dog-training programs is relatively new on the East Coast, but has already found success at the Downeast Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Maine. After one year, those involved noticed a decrease in tension throughout the prison and that inmates produced exceptionally well-trained dogs, a result that may be linked to the amount of time that inmates can devote to the dogs. Employees of private assistance dog programs simply cannot devote the same amount of time to training puppies as inmates can. After spending approximately one year with the inmates, the dogs that pass the initial tests then advance to rigorous service dog training with NEADS, the National Education for Assistance Dog Services. Although reluctant at first to have inmates training dogs, NEADS Executive Director Sheila O'Brien has come to realize the high level of attention and instruction that the dogs receive from inmates. The partnership between NEADS and the prison puppy program was so strong that of a recent graduating class of 53 dogs, more than half had received their initial training from inmates, Gold reported.

One of the most recent and successful inmate dog-training programs is Puppies Behind Bars, founded by Gloria Gilbert Stoga in 1997 in New York. Having heard of such programs in Ohio prisons, Stoga approached several guide dog breeding centers but was met with little to no assistance. To prove that inmates could raise dogs, Stoga took five puppies that initially had been rejected by a guide dog program and gave them to inmates at two separate facilities to be trained. The inmates were so successful in raising the dogs that the guide dog program began providing qualified dogs to the inmates, and Puppies Behind Bars was born. Inmates first learn the basics of dog training, such as housebreaking and grooming, which consist of classes three days a week. After a careful selection phase and classroom instruction, the inmates begin training the dogs.

Puppies Behind Bars has been very successful, with 87 percent of dogs trained by inmates being found fit to move on to more rigorous training, as compared with only 50 percent of those trained by volunteers outside the prison walls. Specially bred and placed in prisons at a very young age, each dog remains at the prison for at least a year, constantly under the supervision of its inmate teacher. Dogs first rejected by official training schools excelled

under the attention and compassion exhibited by the inmates. The puppies are usually rotated between correctional facilities to give inmates an opportunity to be apart from the dogs, which lessens the impact on them when the dog completes training and leaves. Dogs involved in Puppies Behind Bars also get weekend trips outside of the prison with volunteer sitters who provide the puppies with the opportunity to see "life on the outside." These weekend trips allow the puppies to continue their socialization into the outside world, as well as expose them to the sights and sounds of everyday life, such as cars, horns, riding in automobiles and moving in traffic, making the dogs more well-rounded.

Bland Correctional Center's Prison Pup Program

A final program that warrants discussion is the Prison Pup Program at Bland Correctional Center in Virginia. The authors observed the program firsthand in March 2003. Emma Eaton is the prison counselor and puppy coordinator at Bland and is the program's main supervisor. The program began after a local service dog foundation, Saint Francis of Assisi, approached the Virginia Department of Corrections in hopes of starting a prison puppy program at the facility. After careful planning and development, the first service dog program in Virginia prisons began in June 2002.

Based on prison puppy programs in Ohio, the relatively young program at Bland had no major problems during its first year of operation. Only honor inmates (those who have had no infractions during their terms) are allowed to work with the dogs. Each inmate is interviewed by Eaton and screened for a history of domestic abuse. Inmates with a history of violence against animals are immediately disqualified. Inmates with longer sentences are preferred for the program due to the extensive training that inmates must receive before working with a puppy. They also are paid 35 cents per hour for their work with the puppies, a salary that is in the higher bracket of money earned by inmates. Inmates participating in the Prison Pup Program live in a special honors dorm that is separated from the rest of the prison population. This allows for inmate trainers to spend every minute of the day with their puppy.

Eaton believes that, to date, the Prison Pup Program has been a 100 percent success. This sentiment is shared by the facility's inmates and staff as well. Eaton began to notice immediate changes in the inmates after they began working with the puppies. She noted that inmates in the program work much better with one another, have improved their social skills and have a newfound sense of responsibility. They also have learned trust, how to care for someone other than themselves and how to work as a part of a training team. Despite a great deal of skepticism at first on the part of prison staff, the entire facility has benefited from the introduction of the program. Correctional officers and administrators alike note that there has been a noticeable increase in the morale of inmates and employees in the facility. Inmates often walk by the building housing the program in hopes of catching a glimpse of the puppies. The puppies often exercise in the main quad of the facility and inmates in the general population are welcome to pet the puppies when they are not in training (after asking the handler for permission). When training, the puppies wear vests that alert inmates that the puppies are "working" and are not to be bothered. They are clearly a tremendous source of pride for the institution. Each inmate knows the name of every puppy and the entire inmate population enjoys receiving updates regarding the puppies' training.

The program also has received a great deal of attention and support from the community. Several volunteers outside the prison serve as "chaperones" for the puppies during weekend furloughs. All outside handlers undergo background checks to ensure that they are fit to care for a puppy, and correctional officers search all returning puppies to make sure that no one has tried to use a puppy to smuggle contraband into the prison. The prison also receives assistance from Saint Francis of Assisi. Through funding from Carillon (a local health care provider), Saint Francis of Assisi supplies all food, towels and training equipment that the puppies will need in the prison. Its staff are also responsible for taking the puppies to the veterinarian for shots. The inmates are solely responsible for bathing and grooming their puppies. Fortunately, Bland was able to use space in the facility for the program and did not have to add any additional buildings, which was one of the main reasons that the prison was selected for the program.

Inmates begin training for the Prison Pup Program by participating in classroom instruction and reading numerous instructional manuals provided by Saint Francis of Assisi. The inmates also rely heavily on one another to solve problems that they have with their dogs during training. Although each dog has a primary trainer, all the inmate trainers play an integral role in training each of the puppies. The older, more experienced inmates run most of the handlers' classroom sessions and serve as tutors and mentors to the less experienced inmates. During classroom instruction observed by the authors, inmates conducted a class about particular problems they were having with their puppies. Problems that were addressed included socialization, bite inhibitions, house training, crate training (the process of teaching a puppy to sleep in a crate) and leash walking. Three older inmates conducted most of the class for six new inmates who were learning to train their own puppies. On average, the program has six to eight inmates and four to six puppies. As of this writing, there are 10 inmate trainers and six puppies.

Training assistance dogs is a very sophisticated and complex enterprise. During training, the older puppies (the oldest are 10 months old; the youngest are 3 months old) respond to the commands of sit, stand, come, pick up keys and pick up leash. Some of the puppies can even retrieve various objects when prompted only by a verbal command as opposed to solely a hand signal, as well as turn lights on or off.

At the conclusion of the classroom instruction, each inmate has the opportunity to discuss the impact the puppies have had on their lives during their time at Bland. One inmate noted that working with the puppies has helped him develop patience working and interacting with other people, while also reducing the amount of stress that he has experienced since entering prison. Another inmate said that the program has "brought sunshine and laughter" into the compound and has helped him eliminate negative thinking and to deal with the emotions that arise when in prison. Another described the Prison Pup Program as "an awakening experience" that reinforces positive interaction with others. He noted that one of the best program rewards is that "as the puppies improve, you improve yourself as well." The most telling remarks about the program were made by two inmates who agreed that traditional programs do not come close to the rehabilitative effects of the Prison Pup Program. Alcoholics Anonymous, anger management and drug rehabilitation programs did not help one of the men with his problems, but the Prison Pup Program is "keeping him clean," and he hopes that this positive impact on his life will continue upon his release from prison. It is clear that this program truly is impacting the lives of all involved and that it is having an incredible effect

on the inmate trainers. Eaton noted that the program has been an excellent experience for the inmate handlers and that it is the best program that Virginia has introduced in years.

Benefits for Inmates and Correctional Facilities

One of the many benefits of successful inmate dog-training programs includes the excellent public relations that occurs in the community. These programs give the community an opportunity to see inmates doing good deeds. Nancy Bouchard, former assistant commissioner of the Maine DOC, told the *Blethen Main Newspapers* that inmate dog-training programs give inmates the "opportunity to look outside themselves and learn how to give selflessly." While the impact of inmate dog-training programs on recidivism has not been formally studied, such a transformation in an inmate provides an excellent opportunity for self-reflection and serves as a powerful motivator to move on with one's life and succeed on the outside upon release from prison.

According to the Prison Dog Project Web site, inmates "learn responsibility, patience, tolerance, as well as being good trainers with kindness and love" and the dogs serve as "a bridge between the inmates and the guards" and they help to bring an overall "sense of calm in the institutional setting." Such was the case at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center, a medium-security institution in Lexington, Okla. Two benefits of the program were a reduction in the number of aggressive incidents in the prison and a marked change in chronically depressed and reclusive inmates. Prison officials examined the effects of the puppies on their mental health unit by counting the number of aggressive incidents four months prior to the puppies' arrival to the prison and comparing that to the number of aggressive incidents four months after the program was instituted. According to the 1991 *Corrections Today* article, "Pet Therapy: Program Lifts Spirits, Reduces Violence in Institution's Mental Health Unit," by Marcia Haynes, there was a total of 68 aggressive incidents in the four months prior to the puppies' arrival, 12 of which were physical altercations. There were only 39 aggressive incidents four months after the puppies' arrival in the prison, with only six involving physical altercations. This represents a 43 percent decrease in the total number of aggressive incidents. Although prison staff noted that a new psychologist hired during the time of the study had been beneficial to the inmates in the facility, the article states that they could not deny that the puppies had a profound impact on lowering levels of aggression in the prison.

A final point of discussion is the benefits that prison puppy programs can provide for inmates seeking employment after they complete their time in prison. Aside from the basic dog-training skills they learn, inmates can learn more advanced skills and seek employment outside of prison working with animals. After working with puppies at the Coleman Federal Correctional Complex in Florida, one inmate serving 16 months for bank fraud earned a certificate in veterinarian assistance and intends to earn her two-year veterinary technician certificate after her release. With such overwhelming evidence of its success, it is clear that a well-run inmate dog-training program can be a beneficial experience for inmates, correctional institutions and society as a whole.

What to Consider

Although prison puppy programs have been very successful, there are several considerations that must be evaluated before implementing an inmate dog-training program in a prison. One overwhelming consideration that was apparent in all the successful programs reviewed for this article was support from both the community and local dog-training schools. Prison administrators have to be able to convince a dog-training school that the prison is prepared for training dogs and that it has facilities to conduct the training, and coordinate with the schools to get professionals to teach the inmates how to properly train puppies. Prison administrators also need to show that their facility contains responsible inmates who want to give back to the community and are sincere in their desire to work with puppies. Along with this, prisons need to have a strong base of community volunteers who will care for and keep the puppies for weekend furloughs throughout the puppies' training.

Another important consideration is the physical facility in which the puppies will be located, keeping in mind the puppies' overall welfare. Many prison facilities have special areas designated for puppy training away from the regular prison population. At Bland, puppies stay with inmates in the Honor Building where only the prison's most well-behaved inmates are housed. The Wisconsin Correctional Liberty Dog Program took an existing farm shop on prison grounds and completely remodeled the structure, putting in its place a dog-training center and kennel. It is imperative that prisons have both adequate facilities and access to veterinary health care for the puppies used in the program.

A very important aspect of inmate dog training that could directly impact the puppies is the selection of inmates who will train them. Animal abuse has been clearly linked to other types of crimes against people, including violent crime and property crime, but even more important as an indicator of family violence. According to the Doris Day Animal Foundation, in abusive relationships, animals can be used as means of control by an abusive husband who threatens harm or death to a family pet if his commands are not met by his wife or children. Therefore, it would stand to reason that prison officials must be extremely careful in selecting inmates to be entrusted with the task of training puppies. Another concern is using puppies to smuggle contraband into a prison facility. Dogs have been used in airports to smuggle cocaine surgically implanted in their bodies by drug dealers, a cause for concern for inmate dog-training programs in which the puppies leave the prison for weekend furloughs. A puppy in the hands of the wrong inmate could be a serious hazard to the welfare of both puppies and the prison population.

Of the programs reviewed, each had a careful screening process to prevent these problems from occurring. In several of the New York programs, inmates undergo a careful screening and interview process to ensure that inmates who committed heinous crimes are not given puppies. Inmates are also required to have at least two years left on their sentences. This is important because it takes a great deal of time for inmates to develop the necessary skills to train a puppy and program administrators like to use the same inmates for several rotations of puppy training, as opposed to training new inmates yearly. In some programs, inmates who had committed violent crimes against people were allowed to train puppies and have done so with great success. It is up to each individual prison to decide which inmates will be allowed to train dogs and those who should be denied the opportunity due to the crimes they committed against society.

Finally, it is important for prisons to consider the funding issues that accompany a program such as Puppies Behind Bars. Aside from an occasional federal grant, prison puppy programs depend heavily on community assistance and donations. Several of the programs studied for this article receive considerable donations of supplies from guide/service dog programs. But more often than not, inmates generate the income for the prison puppy programs through bake sales or selling items manufactured in the prison workshops. Thus, it is readily apparent that in order for a prison puppy program to be successful, it must consider various forms of fund allocations to allow for program implementation and operating costs.

A "Win-Win Situation"

Prison puppy programs around the nation have achieved high levels of success with inmates, correctional facilities and the community. Although questioned at first as a threat to prison security and stability, prison puppy programs have given inmates a renewed purpose in life and have broken the pattern of loneliness and despair that permeate throughout America's prisons. It also provides inmates with excellent training they can use to seek employment once they leave the confines of prisons. More important, disabled, handicapped and elderly Americans are provided with well-trained dogs that facilitate better quality of life that can occur as a result of a disability. Prison puppy programs are a win-win situation for all involved and could very well signal a change in the way in which correctional facilities approach the rehabilitation of inmates in the future.

ENDNOTES

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2nd Lt. Todd Harkrader is a military intelligence officer for the U.S. Army. Tod W. Burke, Ph.D., is a professor of criminal justice and Stephen S. Owen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of criminal justice at Radford University in Radford, VA.