

Emotional Rescue

Specially trained canines help ease courtroom tensions

A new video promoting the use of specially trained dogs to comfort children in court proceedings is being offered to judges, lawyers and others handling family matters.

“Comfort Dogs in the Courts” provides an overview of the canines and their handlers, and a list of nonprofit groups that will work with community leaders to help set up a customized program. Pennsylvania judges also speak of their personal experiences with the dogs and the positive influence the dogs have on court dealings.

The video is being offered by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, a department of the AOPC that produced the work along with the AOPC communications office staff. The full 20-minute version and an abridged five-minute edition are available for viewing on the state court system’s YouTube channel.

Studies show comfort dogs can create a calming presence, especially in matters that involve children who have been neglected, known in the court as “dependent children.” Situations that require the court to determine parental rights or custody also may be opportunities for the dogs to be used when children are present.

“Instead of focusing on the trauma they have experienced, the memory many children have about court is spending time with the dog,” Supreme Court Justice **Max Baer** said. “The use of comfort dogs can help bring about a major change in how we meet the emotional needs of all involved in the child dependency system.”

Experts also maintain information provided to the court is more complete and accurate when stress levels are eased.

“Having the very best information possible is critical as life-altering decisions are made in these courtrooms,” OCFC Director **Sandra Moore** said.

To qualify for the program, a dog and handler must undergo training and earn certification through national organizations.

About one-third of the state’s 60 judicial districts either already have or are in the process of establishing a comfort dog program. Growth in program use and the amount of research bolstering the benefits fueled the desire to create an informational video.

“Counties are able to create comfort dog programs that truly fit their needs. There isn’t one set formula which allows for creativity at the local level,” Moore said. “I think courts are finding that the benefits far outweigh any concerns. The human and animal bond is strong and can have significant outcomes towards reducing trauma.” **AOPC**



Health Benefits after a 10-minute therapy dog visit

64% Drop in feelings of anger

53% Drop in anxiety

48% Decrease in depression

39% Decrease in fatigue

19% Boost in energy

3% Slowing breathing rate

Coakley & Mahone, 2009, Massachusetts General Hospital

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INFORMATION

Watch the video online or obtain copies by contacting OCFC at 717-231-3300, ext. 4255 or elke.moyer@pacourts.us.