

Going to the Dogs:

Prison-Based Training Programs Are Win-Win

By Pamela S. Hogle

Across the country, prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers and other correctional facilities are discovering the benefits of in-house dog-training programs. Many of these programs work with service dog training organizations to train assistance dogs for members of the community with disabilities. Others rehabilitate retired racing greyhounds and dogs from area shelters, teaching them skills and manners that will enable them to be placed with adoptive families.

"I have never been in a partnership that has been such a win-win," said Sheila O'Brien, the executive director of NEADS, Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans, a Massachusetts service and hearing dog organization. NEADS places puppies-in-training in 15 New England prisons. "The inmates win: They learn nurturing skills and have this adorable puppy with them," O'Brien explained. "We win:

The caliber of training is unbelievable. After all, these guys have a lot of time on their hands. Even staff at the prisons win. They say it's like a breath of fresh air, that having a few puppies there changes the entire atmosphere of the prison."

Participants in prison-based dog-training programs echo the positive assessment. "It's a win-win, for us and for the dogs," said Brian, an inmate at Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Mich. Brian trains retired racing greyhounds, teaching them manners and getting them accustomed to being around people and other dogs. "Some of them have never been on stairs. We teach them with one person in front, one in back, and walk them up," Brian explained.

Brian, who is working with his sixth dog in the program, enjoys seeing the transformation in the dogs. "They're scared to death when they come in," he said, adding that one of his dogs came in with several scars from the cattle prods used by racetrack trainers. "Now they're happy. I didn't know dogs could smile."

Proponents of the programs say they offer benefits to multiple populations; not only do the dogs get attention and training, but participating inmates gain the chance to learn important life skills while making meaningful contributions to their communities. Service dog organizations, such as NEADS, find that a single trainer can oversee inmates working with dozens of dogs and that the dogs learn solid skills while spending time in prison. Rescue organizations see the prison-based programs as a way to make dogs more adoptable and therefore save dogs' lives. And, administrators in facilities that host dog-training programs often report benefits that extend far beyond the small number of inmates actually participating — benefits including reduced tension and violence facilitywide.

Rehabilitation and rescue is at the heart of the Lakeland program where Brian is training his dog. Warden Carol Howes works with two nonprofit rescue organizations. One, a Florida-based program called Second Chance at Life, brings retired racing greyhounds to the prison. The other is a local group, Refurbished Pets of Southern Michigan. Both groups save dogs' lives by rehabilitating them and finding adoptive families.

The Michigan program matches inmates with homeless dogs for three months at a time. A pair of inmate handlers teaches each dog basic house and leash manners as well as skills including recall, shaking hands, and sitting and lying down when asked. All kinds of dogs are trained in prison,



Courtesy Lakeland Correctional Facility

Greyhounds wear new coats provided for them by Second Chance at Life, a Florida nonprofit organization that brings retired racing dogs for training and rehabilitation to Michigan's Lakeland Correctional Facility.

from Pomeranians to 100-pound dogs. “We won’t take pits or German shepherds, though,” said Teri Cline, a budget officer in the Michigan Department of Corrections who was instrumental in getting the programs started.

Howes credits the program with changing attitudes of inmates throughout the institution, not only the handlers themselves. “It really does have a calming effect,” she said. Howes is the warden of a prison complex that includes three different security levels, from Camp Branch up to a level-two facility. Inmates can stay in the program for as long as they are in the facility, even if they change levels, unless they have a conduct violation.

Unfounded Concerns

Rehabilitation of inmates was a goal from the start with the NEADS programs as well, O’Brien said. The initiative for a prison-based dog-training program came from the then-commissioner of prisons for Massachusetts, Michael Maloney. He believed that it fit with his ideal that inmates should make a meaningful, safe contribution to society while serving time, O’Brien said. Still, when Maloney first suggested a program, O’Brien was ambivalent.

On the one hand, people were waiting nearly four years for dogs. NEADS trains assistance dogs for a variety of “careers,” including service dogs for people with mobility-limiting disabilities, hearing dogs and assistance dogs for children who have autism.

“But I wasn’t sure,” O’Brien said, explaining her worries about placing puppies in prisons. She wondered: What if someone hurt a puppy? How would the donors feel about it? How would the inmate handlers react if the puppy they trained did not make it as a service dog? She laughs, “I probably watched too many Jimmy Cagney movies.”

O’Brien spoke to Maloney and to Lynn Bissonnette, who was, at the time, superintendent at North Central Correctional Center in Gardner, Mass., when its NEADS program started. O’Brien was convinced, and she agreed to start a pilot program at the Gardner facility. The first two puppies, Zenus (“gift from God”) and Pax (“peace”) were placed at the facility a few days before Christmas in 1998.

“When we started, there were concerns on both sides,” Bissonnette confirms, but these proved unfounded. A change in the atmosphere at the prison was immediately noticeable, Bissonnette said. “I was astounded by the positive effect on the climate,” she adds. Everyone loved the puppies — inmates and staff alike. “It was something for staff and inmates to talk about that was positive, not about problems,” she said, adding that staff members would go out of their way to visit the unit and interact with the puppies — and their handlers. Bissonnette is now superintendent at MCI Framingham, a medium-security women’s facility where NEADS puppies are also trained.

“Our trainer went there for two hours, once a week,” O’Brien explained. When the puppies came back to NEADS, O’Brien and the trainers saw that “the puppies were well-trained but not well-socialized. They freaked out when they saw everyday items like wastebaskets. I realized that the inmates lived in a very sparse environment — no potted plants, no wastebaskets — and that we had to find a way to get them socialized.”



Paula Riccard

NEADS puppies in training relax at MCI-Plymouth, one of 15 New England correctional facilities in the Prison Pup Partnership.

Working with correctional administrators, including Bissonnette, NEADS devised a model that, with a few tweaks, still works today:

- A trainer conducts weekly training classes at the prison. Since most prisons will not allow inmates to have nail clippers or grooming scissors, the trainer performs some routine grooming and also administers monthly heartworm and flea preventives. Between weekly meetings, the inmate-handlers work on their own and with each other to practice skills with the dogs and care for the dogs’ daily needs.
- Each puppy has a primary handler and a secondary handler in the prison. The secondary handler can take over if the primary is at a prison job where the dog cannot accompany him, for example. Also, if the primary handler is removed from the program for an infraction or is transferred to another facility, the secondary can step right in and continue the training. Some handlers train more than one puppy, depending on the length of their sentence and whether they want to continue participating in the program.
- NEADS created the “Pups on Parole” program to socialize the puppies. Each puppy has a “weekend puppy raiser,” a volunteer, often a couple or a family, who takes the puppy out for an overnight visit each week. The volunteer puppy raisers take the puppy to all kinds of places a working service dog will need to go, such as supermarkets, train stations, airports, shopping malls, movies and school sporting events. The puppy also gets exposed to a normal home environment and learns house manners.
- A liaison at each facility oversees the inmate handlers and day-to-day concerns. The liaison looks for a local veterinarian, — many donate basic care — orders equipment and dog food, assists the NEADS staff in selecting handlers, and coordinates with the weekend puppy raiser families. O’Brien emphasizes

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that the “program is only as good as the prison liaison. This person is the eyes and mouth of our trainer at the prison, making sure the inmates are following through with the training and care of the dogs.”

Things, however, do not always go smoothly. For example, inmates get in trouble, or are released, before their dog is ready to come back; puppy raiser families are sometimes hard to find; and liaisons leave a facility. But, overall, the program has been an enormous success, expanding rapidly to a range of facilities (from work-release and county facilities to state medium-security prisons) in four New England states.

Positive Impact

Although there has been no formal follow-up on inmate participants, Bissonnette cites anecdotal evidence that the program has improved inmate behavior. “Women have said, ‘if it weren’t for the dog, I’d have said something to her.’ The fear that they will lose their puppy if they have a discipline report is a huge carrot,” Bissonnette said. “Problems are very infrequent and the staff is supportive.”

Staff concerns, which included worries that the dogs would be disruptive and that inmates would use the dogs as a pretext for trying to move into specific housing units, have not materialized. The cost to the prison is minimal and the amount of staff time needed is small. A liaison at each prison oversees the program and the inmates, and occasionally a staff member has to take a sick dog to the veterinarian, Bissonnette said.

When the first puppy from Gardner graduated as a service dog, the new handler brought his service dog for a visit to the prison to meet the inmate-trainer, Bissonnette said. “That had a major impact, seeing how much of a difference the dog made in someone’s life,” she said. “Staff who may have been on the fence really bought in to the program after seeing the impact the dog had.”

Howes cites additional benefits. For example, the program creates jobs and provides vocational training for the participants. She has about 30 dogs at a time in her programs, and would like more. Howes also said she knows several other wardens at Michigan facilities who would love to have dog-training programs at their facilities.

Lakeland’s programs are nearly fully funded by the partner organizations, Howes said, and they cannot put more dogs in right now. The prison pays only the inmates’ salaries, a few dollars a day. Second Chance at Life and Refurbished Pets cover all other costs and handle logistics such as getting the dogs to the prison, finding adoptive homes, and picking up the trained dogs. Not all of the dogs go far. Howes says several staff members have adopted program dogs. In fact, her own dog, Connor, is a recent graduate.

Nearly all the prisons with dog-training programs have strict behavioral criteria that applicants must meet, such



Paula Riccard

Raison shows off his wheelchair skills at the NEADS Prison Pup Partnership 10th anniversary celebration.

as no discipline tickets for six months or a year. Once an inmate is in the program, he or she can ask to leave, though that is rare. Inmates might also be removed if they have a conduct violation.

Before the program started, Howes says, she was concerned about how it would impact the prison population. “Is this going to be like the haves and have-nots?” she wondered. But even inmates who are not dog handlers have gotten involved, making mattresses and jackets for the dogs out of thrown-away items.

Donald, an inmate-trainer, is proud to save the lives of the dogs he trains. “It gives us a chance to stop them from being euthanized, and to show that we can be responsible,” he said. Donald says the dogs have taught him patience. “The best thing to learn is patience,” he said, adding that many of the dogs are unaccustomed to everyday items like fans. “Some of them come in, they don’t even know how to play. We teach them to play and how to be social with people and with other dogs.”

Most of the handlers in the program have some previous experience with dogs, even if it was only having a pet as a child. Tolan, however, had never had a dog. He learned about training and dog care from handlers who were already in the program. “We help each other out,” he explained.

Tolan has enjoyed learning about dogs. The most surprising thing he has discovered is how forgiving dogs are. “They don’t hold grudges. They teach you how to be patient, and how to be loving,” he said. “When you’re away from your loved ones for so long, you can get disconnected. The dogs give you a chance to be affectionate.”

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