DOG PROGRAMS IN PRISONS:

BENEFITS FOR FORENSIC MENTAL HEALTH

By

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Husky Kaya from Hollywood Huskies rescue with trainers from the Paws for Life program at Lancaster State Prison. *Photo credit: Rita Earl Blackwell (All photos used with permission).*

OVERVIEW

Dog Training Programs in Prisons

- Types of dog programs in prisons.
- What they are – and what they aren't.
- Prevalence in the U.S.A. and abroad.
- Origins and evolution.
- Why dogs?
- Benefits to individuals who are incarcerated.
- Benefits to dogs.
- Benefits to society.
- Potential risks and challenges.
- An inside look at the Paws for Life program at Lancaster State Prison.
- Research findings and research limitations.
- Attachment theory and the human-animal bond.
- ACEs, Trauma, and the Impact of Dogs

TYPES OF PROGRAMS

3 Main Types of Dog Programs in Prisons

1) Dog training programs.
   A) Train unadopted shelter/rescue dogs to make them more adoptable.
   B) Train puppies/dogs to become service dogs for veterans and/or individuals with disabilities.

2) Dog visitation programs – spend time playing and petting dogs without formally training them.

3) Therapy (individual or group) led by a mental health professional with dogs incorporated as part of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT).

WHAT THEY ARE – AND AREN'T

Dog Training Programs & Dog Visitation Programs

- Dogs are *not* used in conjunction with a direct psychological component as in Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT).
- They are *not* considered a "treatment" program – mental health benefits and improvements in the clients happen as a by-product of the work and interactions with dogs.
- *"Rather than reading about decision-making and taking on responsibility, participants make right decisions and demonstrate they are trustworthy by fulfilling high-level expectations every day. They do not passively receive information or lessons about how to be responsible and caring—participants are responsible and caring"* (Jalongo, 2019, p. 23).

WHAT THEY ARE – AND AREN'T

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)

- Dogs/AAT are considered an adjunct modality in combination with therapy conducted by a licensed professional.
- Dogs/AAT are *not* a self-standing form of "treatment."
- Overview of how dogs are incorporated into mental health treatment and therapy through specific AAT techniques and various theoretical orientations.

PREVALENCE

In the USA

- In the USA, there are over 290 dog programs in prisons across all 50 states.
- Dog training programs are the most prevalent

Outside the USA

- Dog prison programs exist in many other countries including Canada, Australia, the UK, Europe, Israel, Japan, and South Africa.

ORIGINS

- In 1924, Pennsylvania Governor Pinchot sent his dog Pep into prison to "boost morale."

- Sister Pauline Quinn is considered the founder of prison dog programs.
  - In 1981, she founded a Prison Pet Partnerships at a women's correctional facility in Washington State, after recognizing the value of dogs based on her own experiences of connecting with dogs to help heal trauma and abuse.

- Psychological, emotional, and physiological benefits of animals and dogs have been noted for centuries.
  - The famous British nurse Florence Nightingale wrote in the 1850s that "*a small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially*" (Jalongo, 2019, p. 19).

ORIGINS (CONT.)

- In January 1975, an injured wild bird found its way into the Oakwood Forensic Center in Lima, Ohio.
  - Inmates nursed the bird back to health.
  - Connections and interactions among inmates and between inmates and staff were noticeably improved through the joint goal of helping the bird.

- As a follow-up, this same hospital conducted a study between two identical forensic wards where one had pets and the other did not. After one year, the following findings were noted:
  - In the ward with pets, there was reduced violence.
  - In the ward with pets, there were 0 suicide attempts (versus 8 suicide attempts in the ward without pets).
  - In the ward with pets, the inmates required half the amount of medication.

EVOLUTION

- 3 factors led to the increase of dog programs in prisons in the 2000s:

1. Growing research on the benefits of the human-animal bond.

2. Empirically validated models for prison-based dog programs.

3. Increased interest in rehabilitation versus punishment.

WHY DOGS?

- Dogs are the species with the greatest ability to provide support, empathy, and unconditional love.

- Dogs are readily available.
  - Estimated 525 million dogs in the world.
  - 89.7 million dogs owned as pets in the USA alone.

- Dogs are the most in-demand species for the military and law enforcement, and they are the most in-demand as service dogs to people with disabilities.

BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

- When working with shelter dogs -- there are "few opportunities for incarcerated individuals to help those worse off than themselves" (Jalongo, 2019, p. 19).

- Parallels between prisoners and shelter dogs:
  - Considered of little value.
  - Live predominantly in "cages."
  - Treated more like property than living beings.

- Purpose and identity – instead of being just an "inmate" they are a "dog trainer."

BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

- Participants are able to learn, develop skills, practice these skills, and change while they are still in prison.

- Increased job opportunities upon re-entry (can be dog-related work, or the dog training can be evidence of work ethic and commitment in lieu of a job history).

- With physical touch prohibited in prison, many individuals have gone months, years, or even decades without physical connection to any living being – until they experience this connection with dogs in these programs.

BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

- Reduced depression and anxiety.
- Improved patience.
- Increased empathy.
- Increased motivation.
- Improved impulse-control.
- Improved social skills, communication, and interactions with others.
- Better decision-making.
- Fewer disciplinary issues.
- Less violent.
- Less aggressive.
- More receptive to helping others.
- Greater compassion for others.
- Increased self-esteem.
- Improved work ethic.
- Greater acceptance of responsibility.

CHALLENGES FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INCARCERATED HOW AND WHY DOGS CAN HELP

None of these things matter to dogs who give non-judgement and unconditional love:

- Prison is a stressful, hostile, and isolating environment.
- Many come from backgrounds of violence, social and/or racial discrimination, economic instability and hardship.
- Many come from families with little to no support.
- Many have been marginalized before, during, and after incarceration.
- Many face present and/or past stigma.
- Many have backgrounds of trauma – consider Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's).
- Many have limited education and poor employment history.
- Many have poor verbal skills and poor literary skills (not needed for communication and connection with dogs).
- Many have mental health issues and/or substance use disorders.
- Many come from homes where these are intergenerational issues.

BENEFITS TO DOGS

- Most shelter dogs who go into prison programs would otherwise be euthanized in over-crowded shelters or caged with little to no human interaction.
- Training in prison gives these dogs a greater chance of adoption.
- 96% of shelter dogs have no obedience training, and when shelter dogs are returned, 47% of the time it is for behavioral/training issues.
- Physiological improvements, such as increased oxytocin and reduced cortisol, occur in dogs and humans alike through the human-animal bond.
- Concerns of harm and stress to dogs in a prison environment have been largely unfounded based on research:
    - The prison environment offers a better quality of life and less stress than typical animal shelters.
    - Through appropriate screening procedures and management, animals are well-cared for and at minimal risk of intentional harm or injury.

BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

- Dogs trained in prison are more adoptable, reducing overcrowding in animal shelters.
- Service dogs are in-demand – with high costs and long waiting lists, they are frequently unaffordable to those with disabilities and training in prisons increases the availability and affordability of service dogs.
- Reduced recidivism and increased employment opportunities for those re-entering the community after incarceration.
- Cost/benefit analysis suggests dog programs are considered a financial asset to prisons with significant benefits for relatively low cost.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND CHALLENGES

- Fears, phobias, and dislike of dogs.
- Allergies.
- Potential for dog bites, injury, and/or zoonotic illnesses.
- Potential source of conflict with non-participant inmates.
- Logistical considerations of dog housing, clean-up, noise, barking, etc.
- Husky-specific challenges.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Each person should be considered individually, and no presumptions should be made; with this in mind, there are some generalized cultural viewpoints which can be taken into consideration when relevant.

- Cultural views of dogs and how this might impact participation in a dog program in prison:
  - African-American
  - Hispanic
  - Asian
  - Indian

PAWS FOR LIFE DOG TRAINING PROGRAM

AT LANCASTER STATE PRISON

Husky Bam-Bam from Hollywood Huskies rescue with trainers from the Paws for Life program at Lancaster State Prison.
Photo credit: Rita Earl Blackwell

- Basic Facts
- Demographics
- Eligibility Criteria
- How the Program Works
- The Story of Oxford
- My Personal Experience Inside the Prison

Husky Bam-Bam from Hollywood Huskies rescue with trainers from the Paws for Life program at Lancaster State Prison.
Photo credit: Rita Earl Blackwell

PAWS FOR LIFE

Basic Facts

- Over 800 incarcerated individuals have graduated from the dog training program.
- 95% were convicted of violent crimes.
- Approximately 150 graduates are still serving out their life sentences, but the rest have either been released or are serving out the rest of their sentence at a lower-level security facility.
- 41 individuals who participated in this dog training program have had their sentences commuted.
- **0% recidivism rate**.

PAWS FOR LIFE (CONTINUED)

Demographics

- All male.
- Ethnicity:
  - 37.5% Hispanic
  - 34.4% African American
  - 13.5% White
  - 13.5% Other
  - 1% American Indian

PAWS FOR LIFE (CONTINUED)

Eligibility Criteria:

- At least 2 years disciplinary free.
- Must have completed at least one prior program for self-improvement (such as anger management).
- Must have no history of animal abuse.
- Violence towards humans is not an excluding factor – many participants were convicted of homicide.
- If an individual is eager but does not meet the criteria, the program works with them to help them reach eligibility.

PAWS FOR LIFE (CONTINUED)

How the Program Works:

- Trainers and dogs are in a separate housing unit together.
- Approximately 30 dogs are in the prison at a time.
- All dogs must originate from LA City shelters.
- Most dogs are unadopted straight out of the shelter, some were taken from the shelter into rescues, and some were directly adopted by the public from the shelter.
- Each dog is assigned to a team of 3 trainers – trainers are deliberately assigned to racially diverse groups, which helps diffuse racial tensions.
- Each dog gets 6 weeks of training, occasionally extended if needed.
- Positive training methods only are allowed.
- A head trainer oversees the training – this used to be an outside person but is now someone within the prison serving a sentence.
- Trainers complete weekly evaluations on each dog.
- At the end of training, each trainer writes a handwritten letter to the future adopter.
- Etiquette – trainers are referred to as trainers or participants (*never* as "inmates").

The Story of Oxford from Hollywood Huskies Rescue

From death row in the animal shelter to prison to adoption.

(Includes a reading of excerpts from the personal handwritten letters of his trainers in prison).

Husky Oxford from Hollywood Huskies rescue with trainers from the Paws for Life program at Lancaster State Prison.
Photo credit: Rita Earl Blackwell

A Happy Ending for Oxford.

Husky Oxford, happily adopted in Alberta, Canada, through Hollywood Huskies' sister rescue Halo Husky Haven in Calgary.

DPW ONLY

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RESEARCH

- Walsh and Mertin (1994) published the first scholarly article on the effects of dog training programs in incarcerated settings.

- Share recent research findings on prison dog programs.

- Limitations of research:
  - Largely based on self-report and anecdotal evidence.
  - Challenges of conducting research in prison settings.
  - Research considerations with vulnerable populations.
  - Most studies are quasi-experimental – true random selection where any inmates could be chosen, is not feasible or safe.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

- A brief overview of the basic tenets of Bowlby's attachment theory and its relevance to the animal-human bond.
- The four types of attachment: secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized.
- Poor attachment to parents/caregivers in childhood is associated with criminal behavior and juvenile delinquency.

RESEARCH ON ATTACHMENT THEORY

- Proximity seeking, protest separation, and fear of loss, all constructs of Bowlby's attachment theory, are prominent in human-animal relationships (Scargnetto et al., 2021)

- Treating pets as family members/friends enables pet owners to find the security they lack in adult attachment, although it is best described as a supplement for security rather than a complete substitute (Chan & Wong, 2022).

ACES AND TRAUMA

- Individuals in the justice system are likely to have a high number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Garbarino, 2017).
- Individuals with criminal histories are more likely to have backgrounds with higher levels of trauma (Fritzon et al., 2021).
- Dogs can have a positive impact on healing from trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (O'Haire et al., 2019).

Q & A