

Partnering with Correctional Facilities to Raise and Train Assistance Dogs

Service Dogs / New Horizons

Sheila O'Brien, M.Ed

The practice of placing dogs in prison for inmates to train was conceived in 1981 when Sister Pauline Quinn approached the administration of the Washington State Correctional Center for Women. Having had a dog named "Joni" help her survive a devastating young adulthood, she knew first hand how animals could enhance self-esteem and heal wounds. Who better to experience this healing than the women in this maximum-security prison?

She first asked several Mental Health Institutions to embrace this project. None were willing. Finally a nearby prison, Washington State, agreed. Daily, Sister Pauline and two volunteer trainers brought their own dogs to the prison. The inmates learned how to properly handle these dogs, and how to give them commands. As the dogs responded to their commands, the inmates' self-confidence grew. As the dogs responded with unconditional love, the inmates learned to trust the affections that were being bestowed on them.

Next, dogs from local shelters were recruited for the inmates to train. These dogs were a challenge to say the least. The women handlers could relate to these dogs however as they too were considered castoffs and unwanted. At first the objective was to place these rescued dogs as pets but the skills that were taught were so advanced, they were able to be placed as Assistance Dogs with people who were disabled.

As word spread about this new project, an anonymous donation was made to build a kennel on the prison property. The "Prison Pet Partnership" (as the first program was called) was born!

Although Sister Pauline's first intent when starting this partnership was to help "heal" inmates, the dogs that were being trained were of great interest to many of the established Assistance Dog Programs. With a different goal in mind; to place more dogs with people who are disabled, many programs contacted Sister Pauline and entered into prison partnerships.

In 1998, NEADS (National Education for Assistance Dog Services, Inc.), a non profit organization that trains dogs to assist people who are deaf or physically disabled, was approached by the Superintendent of a men's medium security prison to explore a partnership. The Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, Michael Maloney, was committed to the objective that inmates should "give back to the communities they violated". He felt training Assistance Dogs offered just such an opportunity.

Although NEADS was having a difficult time meeting their goal of placing fifty dogs a year, they were tentative about a prison partnership. At the urging of Sister Pauline, the two groups met and hammered out an alliance that became the NEADS Prison PUP Partnership. (Sister Pauline suggested that PUP be capitalized and be translated as "Pups Uniting People").

A decision was made by NEADS to place eight-week-old puppies with inmates in the minimum-security unit at the prison. Puppies, as opposed to older shelter dogs, were chosen for placement for three reasons:

NEADS was having difficulties finding foster families to house their puppies for eighteen months and the prison could alleviate this need.

It was felt the inmates would be more tolerant of puppies as opposed to older dogs rescued from shelters that may have behavior problems.

NEADS puppies historically have a better success rate and we all wanted this pilot program to succeed.

Although other prison partnerships were taking place in medium to maximum-security situations, NEADS opted for a minimum-security facility. The North Central Correctional Institute (NCCI) in Gardner Massachusetts was chosen for the first puppy placements. The inmates who received the first puppies were chosen by prison officials. They looked for inmates who were self-motivated, would not get frustrated easily and had posed no discipline problems. At NCCI, raising a puppy was considered an inmates' job and he could receive "good time" (a reduction for time served) for this.

The puppies live with the inmates in their rooms. Two to four men share a room. The correctional facility agreed to put up an outside chain link play yard and to purchase the following equipment for each pup:

- One large crate
- Stainless steel dog bowls
- Dog brush and comb
- Leashes and collars as needed
- Dog toys, chew bones and treats as needed
- Large dog bed or rug
- Toothbrush kit

NCCI takes care of veterinary care and underwrites the cost of a trainer to come in for two hours once a week to instruct the men in puppy care, grooming and training. NEADS trains and manages the trainer under the auspices of the puppy coordinator. Only positive training methods are employed.

The first two pups, Zenus and Pax, were placed at NCCI two days before Christmas in December of 1998. According to anecdotal information from those that work at the prison, the whole atmosphere of the prison changed for the better when the two golden retrievers arrived. The inmates who housed and trained the puppies were doing a great job and were learning to care for another living creature. They were accepting more and more responsibilities. When touring the inmates' rooms I was moved to see a plastic fan set up in front of one of the pup's bed. There is no air conditioning in the minimum-security facility. Inmates can work to buy fans. This inmate opted to give his to his puppy.

In Massachusetts, the Department of Corrections is presently undertaking a study to determine if the prison pups are having a positive effect on the inmates.

As time went on it became evident that the pups in prison were doing well with service dog tasks but were falling behind in the area of socialization. They were taken to every visitor's day at the prison so they were comfortable with women and children but were sometimes fearful of every day objects such as plants, hanging pictures and wastepaper baskets. After analyzing the situation it was concluded that this was happening because of the sparse living conditions of the inmates. There was very little furniture in each inmate's room, nothing adorned the walls. Even though thirty-two men lived in the Gardner minimum-security unit, it was very quiet. There was one TV. If an inmate had access to music he had to listen with headphones. No one ever raised his voice. When the first pups left the prison and were put into family situations they had trouble adjusting.

To alleviate that problem for future pups in prison, NEADS created a new volunteer program called "Pups on Parole". Interested volunteers attend workshops where they are taught to handle a puppy in public. They go to the prisons and take an assigned pup out for the day or sometimes the weekend. These volunteers have the pups perform the special tasks the inmates have taught them in public situations. They also bring them to malls, restaurants and Little League games.

Some areas covered in a Pups' on Parole workshop are:

- Puppy obedience.
- How to put on a gentle leader.
- Where to take your pup for socialization.
- How to handle a fearful pup.
- Special tasks.

The prisons also require that all Pups on Parole volunteers attend an orientation at the prison.

When pups reach the age of one year to eighteen months they are returned to the NEADS kennel to begin their formal training for Assistance Dog work. Upon arrival NEADS assesses the dogs and determines if they are better suited for Social Dog work, Hearing Dog work, Service Dog work, Specialty Dog work or Walker Dog work. Social Dogs provide therapeutic benefits for autistic children. Hearing dogs respond to everyday sounds such as a smoke alarm or baby crying and alert their deaf partners. Service Dogs assist people who use wheelchairs by retrieving objects, turning on and off light switches and pulling wheelchairs. Specialty Dogs help those who are both deaf and physically disabled and Walker Dogs aid with mobility by becoming "walking canes" for those with balance problems. Historically it takes three months of formal training for a Social Dog, three months for a Hearing Dog and six months for a Service, Specialty or Walker Dog.

It appears from the early statistics available that prison pups that have the benefit of inmate training and volunteer socialization do not need as much formal training by the NEADS staff. The following chart outlines the dogs from the Prison Pup Partnership that have been placed with deaf or disabled people.

Facility	Type	Breed	Name	In Kennel	Graduated	Formal Train Time	Usual Train Time
NCCI Gardner, MA	Service Dog	Golden	Zenus	11/16/99	12/14/99	1 Month	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Pax	01/05/00	04/27/00	4 Months	6 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Wrigley	05/12/00	06/29/00	1 Month	3 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Cole	06/13/00	09/08/00	3 Months	3 Months
	Specialty Dog	Golden	Shane	02/21/00	03/29/00	1 Month	6 Months
	Hearing Dog	Valhund	Nina	04/11/01	07/29/01	3 Months	3 Months
	Walker Dog	Lab	Lauriat	02/27/01	07/14/02	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Chase	02/27/02	07/28/02	4 ½ months	6 Months
	Classroom Dog	Gdoodle	Paige	8/22/02	12/02/02	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Munroe	01/06/03	04/14/03	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Jasper	8/02/02	11/04/02	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog(Fac)	Lab	Stella	12/12/02	03/09/03	3 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Spirit	12/12/02	03/31/03	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Sawyer	03/07/04	07/26/04	4 ½ Months	6 Months
	Hearing Dog	Poodle	Pluto	01/21/05			
Hampshire House of Correction (Northampton)	Social Dog	Lab	Sophia	06/07/04	08/27/04	2 ½ Months	3 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Calvin	05/17/04	08/27/04	3 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Chih-Terr	Benson	01/21/05			
Shirley MA	Hearing Dog	Poodle	Finlay	04/11/01	07/29/01	3 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Breaker	10/25/01	02/18/02	3 ½ Months	6 Months
Concord MA	Service Dog	Golden	Rory	07/29/02	11/04/02	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Grady	07/02/03	10/20/03	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Classroom Dog	Golden	Savanna	03/01/04	06/30/04	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Jinx	03/07/04	09/20/04	5 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Chester	10/14/04	02/07/05	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Classroom Dog	Lab	Winn	07/05/04	02/21/05	7 ½ Months	6 Months
	Sm Service Dog	Fox Terr.	Iceman	01/28/05			
Framingham MA	Social Dog	Golden	Dusty	11/03/00	01/02/01	2 Months	3 Months
Maine Correctional	Hearing Dog	Golden	Quinn	08/01/00	09/15/00	1 Month	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Jamie	08/29/01	11/12/01	2 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Destiny	10/06/01	04/01/02	6 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Tucker	11/26/01	04/15/02	5 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Dexter	08/05/02	12/02/02	4 Months	6 Months
Downeast ME	Walker Dog	Golden	Keagan	11/18/00	03/16/01	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Rhodes	08/29/01	11/12/01	2 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Melody	10/14/01	04/15/01	6 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Micah	04/28/02	08/07/02	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Myles	06/06/02	08/07/02	2 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog (Fac)	Golden	Echo	11/01/02	03/09/03	4 ½ Months	6 Months
	Walker Dog	Golden	Justin	11/01/02	04/14/03	5 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Lily	07/03/03	11/30/03	5 Months	6 Months
Plymouth	Service Dog	Lab	Drew	03/07/04	06/25/04	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Hearing Dog	Golden	Cooper	12/31/03	04/23/04	4 ½ Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Braun	06/02/04	09/24/04	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Jacob	10/27/04	02/07/05	3 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Lola	01/19/05			
	Hearing Dog	Cocker-Poo	Pooka	01/19/05			

<i>Plymouth (cont'd)</i>	Service Dog	Lab	Weaver	03/16/05			6 Months
<i>Niantic CT (York)</i>	Social Dog	Lab	Doc	03/01/01	07/09/01	4 Months	3 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Pride	06/15/01	10/03/01	4 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Sampson	06/04/01	09/30/01	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Mystic	06/04/01	09/30/01	4 Months	6 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Durham	1/22/02	04/15/02	3 Months	3 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Webster	1/22/02	04/15/02	3 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Dottie	02/26/02	07/28/02	4 ½ Months	6 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Treasure	07/29/02	12/02/02	4 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Jelani	11/01/02	04/14/03	5 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Blaze	11/01/02	04/14/03	5 ½ Months	6 Months
	Walker Dog	Glab	Danni	04/29/03	10/20/03	6 Months	6 Months
	Hearing Dog	Mix	Hayley	08/04/03	12/28/03	4 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab X	Arby	07/28/03	11/30/03	4 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Brooklyn	07/07/03	11/30/03	5 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog (fac)	Lab	Perkins	09/01/03	02/01/04	5 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Rowan	10/30/03	04/23/04	6 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog for Therapy	Poodle	Gunther (OBI)	11/07/03	04/23/04	6 ½ Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Golden	Finn	03/07/04	08/15/04	5 Months	6 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Riley	03/01/04	06/09/04	3 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Travis	06/01/04	12/10/04	6 Months	6 Months
	Social Dog	Lab	Kitsy	10/26/04	03/21/05	5 Months	3 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	Rosie	11/23/04	02/28/05	3 Months	6 Months
	Service Dog	Lab	CeCe	11/23/04	02/28/05	3 Months	6 Months
<i>Pondville, Norfolk,</i>	Service Dog	Golden	Abby	01/19/05			

65 Prison pups have graduated to date!

By all indications the Prison PUP Partnership has been a very successful undertaking. NEADS now places puppies in eight prisons in three states. It is a “win win” situation for all involved; NEADS, the deaf and disabled people who receive these dogs, the prison staff and the inmates.

Updated 01/05