

No More Homeless Pets Forum

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Topic: Pets in Prisons



Toby Young of Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program outlines the best types of programs to help homeless pets and prison inmates prepare together to rejoin society.

Introduction from Toby Young

Prison dog programs fill two very important social needs. They provide a safe place for homeless dogs to live and they give inmates an opportunity to learn responsibility and accountability. Every dog has the potential to be a wonderful pet. But most of the big dogs, or plain dogs, or active dogs, are passed over for the cute little puppies who eventually grow up into big dogs, plain dogs or active dogs that end up at animal shelters.

With someone's undivided attention and love, these unwanted dogs blossom into wonderful, well-mannered pets that are easily adopted. The effect on the inmates is even more profound. For those who believe that prison should be a place for punishment, prison dog programs probably have little appeal. But in reality, 90 percent of inmates are eventually released from prison, so viewing prisons as a place of rehabilitation is a much more realistic option.

Many inmates have never had the opportunity to learn responsibility. One of my dog handlers stated it perfectly when he said that, until the prison dog program, he had never been responsible for anything in his whole life, not even a plant. No creature had ever depended on him. Learning responsibility for another being is one of the first steps in becoming a legitimate member of society.

Starting a prison dog program requires two simple things: a warden who is committed to the program and a volunteer who is able to spend significant amounts of time managing the program. I have never worked so hard on anything; at the same time, I have never felt so worthwhile and significant in my whole life. Working with the dogs and with the inmates is definitely a project worth pursuing.

Bio for Toby Young

Toby Young is the founder and president of the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program in Lansing, Kansas. The program started in August 2004 with seven dogs. Since that time, more than 850 dogs have entered the Safe Harbor program. At any given time, Safe Harbor has 75 dogs living inside the Lansing Correctional Facility.

The dogs live 24/7 with their inmate dog handlers and are house-trained, obedience-trained and socialized before being taken out to adoption fairs. Many of the dogs receive their CGC (AKC's Canine Good Citizen) certification before leaving the prison. The Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program may be the only program in the country that has dogs in all levels of security: minimum, medium and maximum.

This program benefits the inmates by teaching them a sense of responsibility and accountability. For more information, please visit www.SafeHarborPrisonDogs.com.

What if prison officers object?

Question from a member: I am a correctional officer in Vermont at a work camp. We have a dog program here at the camp. I have been the head of the program since September. It is a great program and I am enjoying it greatly. What experiences do others have dealing with officers who do not like the animals or think that they don't belong in the prison system?

Response from Toby Young: That is probably our toughest issue. There are some officers who do not like dogs. At all. And some officers who believe that having dogs there is "too nice" for the inmates.

We have started to address this issue by going to every officer training class. At Lansing Correctional Facility (LCF), the officers go through a two-week training class every year just to update them on things. I go to each class, which turns out to be about 2 to 3 times a month. At these classes, I bring one of the dogs, show their tricks, talk about where that dog came from. Talk about what our goals are with the program and then open it up to questions.

A lot of times, issues get brought up in these classes and I can just address them there in front of the whole group. Often, the group backs the dog program and the officer with the issues is the minority. That seems to be working well for us.

My ace in the hole is that the warden is fully supportive of the program so if an issue does get escalated it is usually closed in our favor. Thanks for the great question!

Putting together a knockout proposal

Question from a member: I am a corrections supervisor at a minimum custody correctional facility in Spokane, Washington. I also volunteer at the local animal shelters. I just recently received the green light to develop a proposal for a dog program at our facility. Our director is very enthused about the possibility of adding this program to our facility. We have a building that would be suitable. I am supposed to write and submit the proposal.

What other preliminary contacts should I make that I can include in my proposal to show community support? I have several certified dog trainers who have committed. Should I have vets and groomers lined up and what kind of commitment do I ask for? I know this is a broad question but, basically, how do I get started?

Response from Toby Young: When we wrote our proposal for the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program and presented it to the warden and his staff at the Lansing Correctional Facility, we included provisions in the proposal to cover many little things that are so important to the smooth running of a prison dog program.

Medical issues once the dog is inside the prison. Our solution was to provide a basic first aid kit in each of the units containing wound cleaner, antibiotic ointment, vet wrap, some prepackaged antibiotics which could be given after first calling us, some hydrogen peroxide (in case of ingesting something and needing to induce vomiting) and a small list of other items recommended by our vet. We have had to use every one of those items and have expanded our kits to include other items as we found they were necessary. Any time a dog was sick, or injured (exuberant play in the dog yard has sometimes resulted in a puncture wound here and there), the handler contacts the officer in his unit who calls me on my cell phone to advise treatment.

Adoption procedures are something that is easy to overlook. The minute we took dogs into the prison, we had staff members wanting to adopt some of them. You should have a plan from Day One about how to handle adoptions, have a contract in place, and a process for taking dogs out of the facility. We do adoptions every week in our program.

Things that we didn't anticipate and have had to accommodate are laundry procedures. The dogs do get on the inmates' beds and they do leave hair behind. The dog handlers don't mind but some of the other inmates wanted a process in place to be sure that they didn't get any dog sheets back from the laundry. There were also issues with where the dogs could go to the bathroom and when they could go out to go to the bathroom. None of these were major issues but were things we have worked out over the past year.

It is critical to have a vet on your team who is willing to perform spays and neuters, vaccinations and heartworm tests at a discounted/affordable rate. All dogs going in to the program should have at least those things done, plus being dewormed. We do keep our dogs on heartworm preventative the entire time they are in the program. Our adoption fees cover this vet work, but our biggest expense, by far, is our vet bill.

Trainers are a big plus. They help provide the handlers with the information they need to train the dogs. Our handlers do their own grooming, unless we have a big mess of a dog come from the shelter that I don't think they will be able to handle. I did purchase a set of electric clippers that are kept in an officer's station and checked out by dog handlers so that they can groom their own dogs. It would be great if you could find a groomer who would come in and show the handlers how to do their own grooming. I mean groom the dogs, not the inmates!

And don't forget to complete all the paperwork with your state animal health department. You may need to get shelter and foster licenses, depending on your state's regulations.

Liability and effectiveness

Questions from Charlie: I've been impressed with the Safe Harbor program ever since I first heard about it. Has there been any thought about conducting an evaluation (for both animal and human) to get documentation of benefits of the program? I think there would be potential funding available from various sources if one could show evidence of the positive impacts the program has for both the prisoners and the families who adopt the dogs.

A second question is: What are the liabilities of such a program in the prison system? Is there reluctance to start such a program due to possible injury or other potential problems associated with dogs with behavioral issues?

Response from Toby Young: I'm glad to hear that you are familiar with the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program. We are very proud of what we have done. In just 15 short months, Safe Harbor has saved the lives of more than 850 dogs. We currently have 75 dogs in the program and have found loving homes for 776 dogs.

We do plan to document statistics on our program, but will not be able to successfully do that until some time has passed and historical data is available. Quite a few of our minimum-custody inmate handlers have been paroled in the past year, and a handful of our medium-custody dog handlers. From what we are able to track, they are all doing well and adjusting to life outside the prison. And almost all of them have taken dogs home with them from the program.

At least one handler has told us that he owes his turnaround to the dogs. They have made all the difference in the world to him. That type of feedback will take time to accumulate, and it is difficult for us to gather because there are rules and regulations against prison staff and volunteers communicating with inmates on parole.

There really are no liabilities for the prison system. They have a medical clinic inside the prison and provide medical care to the inmates. I suppose there could be some issues if a staff member was injured by a dog, but workmen's comp would cover that. Luckily, we have had very few incidents that needed attention. One handler did get bit while trying to break up a dog fight. But, for the most part, we are a pretty injury-free program.

When we first started the program, there was concern over some dog breeds being allowed in. Some officers worried inmates might train the dogs to attack, but that was quickly dispelled and we currently have no breed restrictions at all. We do try to keep dog-aggressive dogs (the source of most of our injuries) out of the program. With so many dogs living together in such a confined area, we have found it is just easier for us to exclude dog aggression. If we take a dog that turns out to be dog-aggressive, we generally return it to the shelter it came from. Any other type of problems, we have had success in fixing.

What does the public think of pet prison programs?

Question from Matt: How do you present this type of program to the community? I can see how it might be controversial. Like you wrote, maybe it doesn't really seem like the inmates are "paying their debt to society."

And how does it work, do potential adopters go to the prison to adopt the dogs? Or are the dogs brought to off-site adoption events, or does it all happen online? Do the inmates present the adoptable dogs, or do they just do the behind-the-scenes training? Do the dogs stay with their assigned inmate up to adoption, or are the dogs at one point returned to a shelter or foster home for adoption?

Response from Toby Young: Surprisingly, the public easily buys in to the concept of a prison dog program. I think the Cell Dog Program on Animal Planet had a lot to do with

paving the road. Many people come by our adoption booth and say, "We saw you on TV!" We used to try and correct them but it didn't seem to matter and so now we just say, "Yes, that was a great show, wasn't it!"

We have had a few people who ask why inmates should be able to have dogs, but they are, by far, the minority. At our adoption events, we play a video that has handler interviews, video and photos inside the prison, and we have literature about the program. In our area, it has become quite the trendy thing to have a "prison dog." In fact, at every adoption event, we have half a dozen of our previously adopted dogs return just to visit and I get e-mails, letters and pictures every week from adoptive families.

We take our dogs out to adoption events every weekend. Safe Harbor has about 75 dogs in the program at any given time. On Saturdays, we take 15 to 20 dogs out to PETsMART to meet the public. Eighty percent of our adoptions occur at outside adoption events. At some of our adoption events, we do take minimum-custody, general worker inmates who are dog handlers with us to help. These inmates are cleared to hold jobs out in the public during the regular work week and are under the supervision of prison officers during the adoptions. They know the dogs better than anyone else does and do a great job of talking to the public about the dogs' personalities and temperaments. They are also hard workers, setting up our pens and walking the dogs.

On occasion, we have taken a potential adopter or two inside the prison to see the dogs in their living environment. These adopters come in as visitors and are escorted by a prison officer. We also have quite a few adoptions through the Internet. All of our dogs are listed on our website and people often select one and then meet me, with the dog, in the parking lot of the prison to conclude the adoption.

Like any other skilled workers, each one of my dog handlers has strengths in certain areas. Some handlers are skilled in bringing out confidence and trust in dogs that have been abused or are terribly shy, others can handle challenging dogs who need a firm (but gentle) hand, while others have the talent of taking dogs further than just learning sit and down. When a new dog comes in to the program, I usually have a good idea which handlers would be the best fit for that particular dog. If that handler has a dog, I keep the new dog in a foster home until that handler is open.

Our dogs never go to a shelter once they enter our program. Once a dog enters the prison, they stay there until they are adopted. Most of the time, the dogs stay with their original handlers. When I take dogs out to the adoption events, the un-adopted dogs are returned to the prison at the end of the day and they go back to their handlers. If a dog is adopted, I replace that dog with the next dog waiting for that particular handler to be free. We average 12 to 18 adoptions each week, so we do move quite a few dogs through the program.

Can volunteers run such a program?

Question from Kim: How many and what types of people contribute to your program on-site? I get the feeling that it is unrealistic to expect a prison employee to manage the program along with the other tasks they are responsible for. Does the prison contract with you? Are there any paid staff or are they all volunteer? Did you start with a nonprofit

governing board that developed the program or was it an individual effort at the beginning and people were added as the program grew?

Response from Toby Young: Those are great questions! I don't have any prison employees who manage the program. That responsibility falls solely on me. I have been through volunteer training at the prison and am able to go inside any time I need to. I visit at least daily, seven days a week – and often three or four times a day depending on what is happening.

A typical day is like today. I picked up six dogs at the prison at 10 am. Two of them were puppies who were dropped off at one vet to get a diagnosis on a skin problem they were having, the rest were driven 15 miles into town to be spayed and neutered at the humane society. The two puppies were picked up on my way back from the humane society and returned to the prison. While I was inside the prison, I checked on three four-week-old orphan puppies, gave them dewormer and advised their handlers on how to make a gruel from baby cereal, puppy replacement formula and cottage cheese. I visited with a dog handler who had just been informed of a death in his immediate family. I took antibiotics to another handler whose dog has an upper respiratory infection. Then I delivered a van load of dog food to another area of the prison before coming back home to answer the 27 e-mails I received while I was gone. In an hour or so, I'll go back to the humane society to pick up the dogs I left for surgery and return them to the prison.

Other Safe Harbor business conducted on this day included interviewing two potential dog handler candidates and discussing them with the prison management team; discussing a collapsible pen a handler wants permission to make for his dog, who is expecting puppies any day, and getting the warden's approval for the pen; talking to the prison unit team about a dog handler who is having an issue with his roommate suddenly not liking the dogs to see if we could move him; and a handful of other miscellaneous little issues related to the prison part of the program.

The Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program is a volunteer program, from the viewpoint of the correctional facility and the state. I have a volunteer badge and go through volunteer training. I manage my own program just like the local colleges manage their classes at the prison or the local religious groups manage their bible study and church celebration meetings.

The program started out as an individual effort and we have added a handful of people to our group. Almost everyone is a volunteer. And, we do have prison employees who volunteer on their days off at our adoption events or other activities. We have a small board of directors and last year the board voted to pay me \$250 a week to cover expenses of managing the program. I don't always take that expense reimbursement; in fact, I have not taken it for about three months now because we needed the money elsewhere. I have one semi-paid person who gets \$150 a week to care for the dogs waiting to go in to the prison, help manage the dogs on the website and keep track of all the hundreds of requests from people and shelters wanting us to take their dogs.

We are a not-for-profit corporation with 501c(3) status through the IRS. We are a licensed not-for-profit-organization in the State of Kansas and have both Kansas and Missouri animal shelter licenses and are inspected by the animal health department of both states.

Training done the right way

Question from a member: How are inmates screened for participation in your program? How do you ensure that dogs will not be trained to fight or to be aggressive? I confess my concern that certain types of people may be more interested in training the dogs to be fighters (either in prison or after they are adopted out) than they would be in training the dogs to be "canine good citizens." And once you select participating inmates, is there a particular training course they go through to learn how to handle the dogs positively?

Response from Toby Young: If an inmate is interested in being a dog handler, they fill out an application, which goes to their unit team. The unit team evaluates the application based on their knowledge of that particular inmate. There are some guidelines about not having any disciplinary reports in a recent amount of time and things like that. Once the unit team approves the application, then I get them and meet with the inmate to discover what he hopes to get out of the dog program and what he thinks he can give to the program.

I have never once, in having over 850 dogs and more than 100 inmates in the program, ever had an instance where an inmate was trying to train the dog to be aggressive. Being in the dog program is an honor and not one that the inmates take lightly. They love and cherish these dogs and are proud to watch them turn into wonderful pets and be adopted by loving families. Most of our families stay in touch with us and send us updates and photographs of the dogs in their new homes. The inmate handlers like nothing better than to hear how their dogs are doing and are just as proud of them as if they were their children.

These inmates are caring men who are proud of being able to do something positive and being able to give back to society. The dog handlers are watched like hawks by officers when they are out in the yard with their dogs and we would get a report immediately if they felt that the handlers were doing something inappropriate. Any reports are investigated by the Internal Investigation Unit and never once have we found any issues with how the dogs are trained or treated inside Lansing Correctional Facility.

I am at the prison every day, several times a day. Once a week, we have an official meeting time when all the handlers meet with me to discuss their dogs, any issues they have, etc. We do have trainers come in as guest instructors. I am a dog trainer myself. Although I don't have time for training with all the time I spend managing the program, I can provide guidance to anyone who needs it. The handlers are excellent trainers and voraciously read any training material I leave for them. We use only positive training, which means we reward the behavior we like and mostly ignore the behavior we don't like. It doesn't take long for the dogs to realize which types of behaviors earn them praise and a treat.

Our dogs, at a minimum, know sit, down, stay, come and heel and are trained to walk on a loose leash. Many of them learn other commands like turning the lights on or off, opening doors, saying their prayers, shake, bow, sit pretty and some even learn their right from their left.

All of our dogs are well behaved when they go out to an adoption event and it is very apparent to potential adopters the difference in our dogs' behavior compared to other rescue groups.

How did you get your start?

Question from Lara: What inspired you to start doing this? It's such an intriguing idea! I'm curious about your decision process, and the pros and cons of running a prison foster/training program vs. more conventional fostering programs, etc. If I were looking at starting up some sort of rescue/foster myself, what factors should I weigh in order to make an informed decision?

Response from Toby Young: That is a tough question to answer. Looking back now, I'm not even sure how it all came together!

I always liked watching the Cell Dogs program on Animal Planet. And in February of 2004, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had surgery in March. There was a long period of recuperation because the thyroid controls metabolism and without a thyroid I had absolutely no energy at all. On top of that, I mostly lost all use of my voice because my vocal cords were bruised by the surgery, so talking was difficult. I had to wait eight weeks after my surgery before I could start hormone replacement therapy and sitting in the recliner watching TV was all I could manage, day in and day out. I'm not a soap opera or talk show kind of person, so Animal Planet was my channel of choice. And Cell Dogs was on for several hours every day. I was inspired by the show.

For about a year or two, I had been volunteering at a couple other rescue groups' adoption events. And each group I worked with had a couple of things they did that I thought I would like to do differently. Having cancer, and surviving, sort of changes your outlook on life in general and when I started feeling better I decided I would just start my own rescue group. At that time I didn't intend to have a prison dog program but about three weeks after Safe Harbor started, the Lansing Correctional Facility decided they wanted to have a dog program. One of the members of the warden's team knew I had just started a group and asked me if I would be interested. He didn't have any idea that a prison dog program was one of my dreams! So it kind of just fell into my lap.

The benefit, I think, to having a prison dog program as opposed to just a conventional foster home program is profound. For one thing, you are able to take in so many more dogs than you could accommodate in a foster home situation. I have 75 dogs in my program and most rescue groups have about a fourth of that at any given time. The dogs thrive on the constant attention.

Since all of our dogs come from shelters, they have somehow been neglected in the past, either by an owner who gave them up or one who didn't bother to find them when they were lost. Inside the prison, they are at the top of the food chain and are doted on by literally hundreds of inmates. They go from being discarded to being cherished and that brings out the best in anyone. Dogs who are very fearful and shy seem to benefit the most from the attention they get inside the prison and I have literally seen miracles happen – dogs who no one believed could come around and trust people leaving our program happily wagging their tails at the end of a leash.

And, of course, there is the infinite benefit the program provides to the inmates. Previously, I never gave much thought to our prison system or the rehabilitation of inmates. In fact, at one time I was contemplating law school so I could work in the district attorney's office. But meeting these men and seeing how much love and compassion they give to these dogs was amazing to me. Getting to know the inmates, I realized that these dogs give them confidence in themselves, teach them responsibility and let them believe that they can truly do something good and can give back to society. If a man believes in himself, anything is possible. After watching the progress of men and dogs through this program, I would probably have to say that the benefits to the inmates outweigh the benefits to the dogs.

If you are interested in starting your own rescue program, you should first check with your state animal health department. I did need to get a shelter license and foster home licenses. The state inspectors, I have found, are truly interested in doing what is best for the dogs and will work with you to help you get the proper paperwork in place. You can start a group by just doing fostering in your own home, which was my original plan, and then grow as you find resources and gain experience.

Tell us more about how well it works

Question from Beverly: I am so very impressed with your hard work and success. Do you have an outline on your adoption policies/screening, etc., and how the dogs are housed and cared for at the prison that you could share? Have you experienced any downside with this program? How hard is it for the handlers to give up their dogs when they get adopted? Do you think that a program like this would also work for cats?

Response from Toby Young: When I started this program, one of the things I wanted to do differently is not exclude so many people who may make wonderful loving homes for dogs who had no hope. I personally believe that I am one of the best dog owners in the world :) and yet I would not pass some of the adoption criteria at some shelters. When I was volunteering for other groups, before starting my own, I watched dozens of really good homes be passed by for the one "perfect" home. Often the dog would stay in foster care for months and months waiting for that perfect home. I believed that if we could place dogs in really good homes, we could adopt more of them than just waiting for the absolute perfect home. For example, I don't have a fenced yard. Which I think may be a blessing for the dogs at times because I go outside with them and interact with them instead of just turning them loose in a yard and going back in the house.

We also don't routinely do vet screenings. I worked at a vet clinic for two years and I know that personal information is covered by the privacy act and the vet staff really is not at liberty to share information, not to mention that they are usually busy and don't have time. We do ask for the vet information and will do a screening if we feel it's necessary. Generally, we spend so much time talking to our potential adopters that we have a really good feel for whether the match will be a successful one or not.

When we are looking for a home for our dogs, we look for someone who loves the dog and it doesn't matter to us if they have a fenced yard or live in an apartment. If the dog's personality fits with what the family is looking for, it's an adoption we consider. We always take any of our dogs back, no matter the reason or length of time. In 16 months, we have adopted 787 dogs, and less than two dozen have been returned. We stay in

touch with our adopters, adding them to our weekly e-mail distribution list and encouraging them to send photos and updates on their dogs that we can share with their handlers. Many of the handlers keep scrapbooks of their dogs.

The handlers do become very attached to their dogs. And when they give up their first two or three dogs, it is really tough. But they soon realize that the minute one dog walks out the door, another very needy dog walks right in. Since I try to replace their dog within the same day, they don't really have time to miss the adopted one. Each week I provide a list of dogs waiting to come into the program. When we pick dogs up for adoption on Saturday, most of the handlers will tell me, "If my dog gets adopted, bring me Heidi (or Jethro or Dash)."

When we come back from an adoption at the end of a long day, the handlers are eagerly waiting to see if their dog is back or if they have a new one. If their dog got adopted, we take time to tell them about the family that received their dog. Sometimes the handlers feel responsible if their dog doesn't get adopted and they want to know what they need to do different. I think I've finally convinced them that sometimes the right family just isn't there for their dog on that particular day and her day will come.

Probably the biggest downside to our program is the fact that we don't have a facility where the public can come in and look at our dogs. We take them out to adoption events, which works fine but it is a lot of work to transport them to adoptions and sometimes Saturdays are not convenient for all of our would-be adopters. The public just cannot freely come in and out of the prison to look at dogs and some people want to "window shop." Other than that, having the dogs inside the prison is wonderful; we have a constant population of dog handlers for whom taking care of the dogs is the highlight of their day. No matter how mundane the task, you will never hear one of my handlers complain. They are grateful for the opportunity to be a dog handler.

I know of several prisons that have cat programs, and some with horse programs. I think any animal would be well received inside a prison where there isn't a lot of opportunity to nurture and care for another living being. The warden at the Lansing Correctional Facility summed it up pretty well in a recent interview when he was asked about the dog program. He said, "These men are human and have the same needs for compassion and love as anyone else. They will make pets out of anything, even a cricket if they can catch one. So we might as well give them someone to legitimately care for."

How does this help the inmates rejoin society?

Question from Robin: Before I pose my question, I just want to say that I met a local, wonderful prison dog raised by female inmates, who is now working within the Passaic County correctional system.

Does training and caring for dogs within a correctional environment provide those incarcerated persons with skills that enable them to find gainful employment upon their release?

No matter what, I think the entire program is a "win win" deal. Everyone involved is taught a lesson and we provide placement for otherwise homeless dogs.

Response from Toby Young: Unless you see the undivided love and attention dogs get inside a prison, you can't really understand how wonderful it is. It is no surprise that prison dogs are perfectly well adjusted, happy, loving dogs.

I just spent a solid eight hours inside the prison today, with an Associated Press reporter and cameraman. Seeing the program through their eyes just re-validated how important and powerful it is to both the inmates and the dogs. Most of our dogs have been discarded in some way and come to us with a feeling of abandonment. For whatever reasons dogs end up in shelters, it is all related to their not being important enough in their owners' eyes. They were left behind because where they were moving didn't allow dogs, or the kids weren't responsible (as if the well-being of another living thing should depend on children), or the owners had a baby and didn't have time anymore, or the dog was sick or old or hurt or maybe even their hair coat didn't match the color of the new carpet. For whatever reason, they became homeless usually through no fault of their own.

Dogs who have been discarded know it. They know what they have lost and shelters are a scary place to be in. When a dog comes to us from a shelter and is showered with undivided love and attention, they blossom and thrive and grow into the most wonderful, happy dogs you've ever seen. And they take that joy and trust with them into their next home.

I do believe that caring for the dogs in a correctional environment definitely provides inmates with skills that enable them to find employment after release. And not necessarily in a field related to what they learned in caring for dogs. The biggest benefit comes from giving the inmates confidence in themselves, a sense of self-worth and self-satisfaction from being responsible for something and seeing a positive result of their effort. These are skills that many inmates don't have when they come to prison. And they are definitely skills they need to gain to succeed in their post-release lives.

Some of them may learn skills in the dog care field that they can take with them and use as an employment resource, but by far the biggest results just come from the social and personal skills they learn in caring for a dog.

The dogs also provide a therapeutic benefit. We have one dog who is a therapy dog in the mental health unit at the prison. Opal spends her days with the men in the TRU Unit and goes back to her living unit in the evening. And I just had an inmate dog handler in our general population tell me today that his mental health counselor cut back on his medication and commented on what a positive influence the dogs have been in his own health care.

Dogs can do amazing things. I see it every day.

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