

Prison dog training program by breakthrough buddies



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Breakthrough Buddies (BB) is an organization which proposes an innovated health intervention using animal assisted therapy (AAT). Breakthrough Buddies' mission is to enhance the mental, social, and physical well-being of incarcerated people; impart marketable skills in inmates for post-release job prospects; and increase shelter dog adoption rates. AAT connects people living with cognitive, emotional and/or physical issues with an appropriate animal, which becomes the fundamental element of their treatment.

Selection of participating inmates is essential to the success of the program; as such we have developed strict selection guidelines. Prisoners interested in entering the program must complete an official application form and must have maintained good behavior during the six months prior to applying. This requirement creates an incentive for good behaviors, as wrong actions can cost the inmate the opportunity (1). Inmates chosen must be willing and able to participate; this criterion demonstrates the inmates motivation to want to change his behaviors. Prisoners with any severe physical or mental illness that may jeopardize the safety of staff members, dogs or other participants will not be permitted to join. Inmates must have no more than 5 years left before their earliest release date, and no less than 12 months before their earliest release date. Furthermore, selected inmates must have possession of, or be in the process of completing a GED or high school diploma; this requirement increases work commitment, motivation for education, and betterment of self. Finally, inmates convicted of animal abuse or violence against women will not be granted admission into the program. There is a strong correlation of animal abuse and violence against women, particularly domestic violence, and this criterion will decrease or eliminate abuse of the

dogs as well as ensure that trainees who use their skills in the future are well-meaning and nonviolent (!!!!!).

Criteria for the dogs entering the program are extensive as well. Dogs will be screened in an in-depth temperament test, conducted by a professional dog trainer, and must show no signs of aggression towards humans or animals. The dogs chosen must be in good health, which will be determined in health exams performed by veterinarian staff at Dixon Animal Shelter. The dogs will come exclusively from Dixon Animal Shelter and will be up to date on vaccinations, spaying and neutering. The no-kill shelter, which is located on prison grounds, opened in December 2010 after functioning in 2006 and 2008 as a temporary emergency shelter for animals abandoned by Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav. Fifty-two dogs at a time are housed in the shelter's adoption center and in the event of an emergency, the shelter can hold up to 500 dogs and cats (!!!!!). The partnership of Dixon Animal Shelter and Breakthrough Buddies will be mutually beneficial in that the shelter will provide dogs for training and we will return well-behaved dogs that are more likely to be adopted.

The intervention program consists of many different levels. The program is ongoing for the inmate but is an eight-week training program for the dogs. During the first year of operation five dogs will be chosen at a time and three inmates will be assigned to each dog. There will be a lead handler/trainer, a secondary handler and a caretaker. Once the dogs are placed with their inmate group they will undergo eight weeks of basic obedience and agility activities, as well as house and crate training. Inmates will be required to engage their dogs in at least 30 minutes of agility exercise before the onset

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of daily training, helping to relax and expel some of the dog's energy before training. At the end of the eight-week training, adopted dogs will be placed in new homes , arranged by Dixon Animal Shelter, or will go back to the shelter and await adoption, and the inmates will receive a new set of dogs to begin a new session.

The personnel needed to implement the program are: a professional dog trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods and who has experience working with prisoners and the penal system. Both a social worker and public health nurse experienced in correctional facilities work and penal system procedures, who will work alongside prison medical staff. A program coordinator, who will be in charge of organizing and will oversee the integrity of the program will be employed. Volunteers and other health professionals familiar with record keeping and research are also included in the intervention team.

The Breakthrough Buddies organization has many goals that it hopes to achieve. BB hopes to improve the psychological, social, and physical state of inmates by improving self-esteem, and by providing non-threatening and non-judgmental affection. BB also hopes to stimulate a responsible attitude within the inmate as well as catalyze communication and social interaction among inmates in and out of the program, guards, and staff. BB wants to improve the atmosphere of the prison, help provide a new focus of attraction, provide a necessary diversion and provide needed companionship. The program also, hopes to improve or build upon the physical activities of the inmates.

The use of animal therapy is not a new concept in today's medical and psychological fields. It began more than a century ago when hospitalized patients relished the companionship provided from a pet (t4). It was not until the 1960s that AAT emerged as an effective tool, helping people cope and rehabilitate (grp11). AAT is useful in a variety of settings such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes and prisons.

Breakthrough Buddies focuses on providing meaningful experiences and skills for incarcerated individuals at Dixon Correctional Institution by using dog training as a form of AAT. Although we will bring our unique approaches and practices into the program, we modeled our program on the current animal training programs that have already demonstrated successes. These programs allow the community to see the inmates doing good deeds and provide inmates the opportunity for introspection. " We want to make sure that the inmates are giving something back to the communities that they once violated," said the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections Michael Maloney. " This innovative program [inmates raise future service dogs for NEADS] is the latest of our reparation efforts, and allows inmates to contribute to society without compromising public safety or security in our institutions" (6).

One of the more powerful examples of the impact animals have on the incarcerated can be found at the Oakwood Forensic Center, a hospital for the criminally insane. A patient in a ward housing the center's most depressed and non-communicative patients found an injured sparrow and conspired with other patients to keep the bird, regardless of the rules; not even plants were allowed on the grounds. The results were remarkable. The despondent <https://assignbuster.com/prison-dog-training-program-by-breakthrough-buddies/>

and non-communicative patients took part in gathering insects and other supplies to care for the bird. The staff noticed for the first time some of the most severely disturbed patients began working in groups and relating openly with other patients and staff. A formal animal therapy program was put into place shortly after. The success of Oakwood's program has paved the way for numerous animal training programs (1).

The Prison Pup Program; a puppy training program, at Bland Correctional Center in Virginia, a minimum-security facility, had results of increased work performance and social interaction among inmates. This sense of responsibility helped inmates trust and care for others beside themselves. One inmate expressed that working with the puppies helped him develop patience and reduced stress; another said the program helped him deal with the emotions that arise in prison and helped eliminate negative thinking through laughter. Inmates remarked that other programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, anger management and drug rehabilitation programs, did not help them with their problems like Prison Pup Program had helped them - it was considered a 100percent success (t4).

In 1999, Downeast Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Maine, found success after one year of implementation. Under supervision by a full-time guard with experience in training dogs, inmates were allowed to take the dogs into town daily, exposing both dogs and inmates to the noises and crowds of the real world. After one year, two clear results were observed (6).

Not only were the dogs remarkably well-trained by inmates, the atmosphere throughout the prison seemed less tense (t4). The commissioner of the

Maine Department of Corrections, Martin Magnusson stated: " The bonding
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that the prisoners have with these dogs by caring for them is visible throughout the prison environment. For some inmates this is their first encounter as a positive role model for the community” (13).

Project POOCH (Positive Opportunities Obvious Change With Hounds) of the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn Oregon, demonstrated that animals also have a positive influence on juvenile delinquents. Sandra Merriam-Arduini, a researcher from Pepperdine University, spent three years studying the impact of animal training on juveniles. The study found that the juveniles who participated in the program showed greater respect for authority, were more honest, had empathy, self-confidence, social growth, patience, higher self-esteem, gained a higher level of responsibility and most importantly, zero recidivism rate (13, 4). B. N., a Project POOCH participant, said: “ Being taught to care for and appreciate these animals, along with the interaction we have with people from the outside, taught us compassion for things other than ourselves. Project POOCH is a great idea, and I hope that ideas such as this one will be used in other correctional facilities as a way of motivating people who need to learn to show kindness, friendship, trust and compassion” (7).

A national survey was conducted on prison-based animal training programs; the survey respondents overwhelmingly regarded these programs as positive and they support the implementation of animal training program in correctional facilities (t6). The programs discussed above collectively demonstrated the positive effects of AAT on inmates. Animals have the ability to bring a sense of serenity to a prison and they affect even the most hardened felons. Several studies and correctional facilities’ staff show <https://assignbuster.com/prison-dog-training-program-by-breakthrough-buddies/>

support in the health benefits of animal-human bonding and suggest that AAT can greatly reduce stress and anxiety (t1). Interaction with animals often helps inmates reduce their aggression, depression and reclusion. To examine the relationship animal interaction and mental health of inmates, prison officials at Joseph Harp Correctional Center in Lexington Oklahoma recorded the aggressive incidents four months before the dogs arrived and four months after the dog-training program was initiated. They found a 43% decrease in the aggressive incidents of inmates, which indicated that dogs have a profound impact in reducing the levels of aggression among inmates (t4). The companionship and non-judgmental affection gained from a pet helps to break the barriers that exist among inmates, leading to better communication and are less defensive, allowing them to become more relaxed (t5). Moreover, animal-training requires physical activity and its advantage is the improvement in physical health. Research shows that interacting with animals can lower blood pressure, blood sugar levels and can reduce heart rate (15).

In addition to benefitting mental well-being, physical health and social skills, animal-training program have also been shown to help inmates seeking employment after their release (t6). Most animal-training programs provided basic marketable and vocational skills, equipping inmates with basic training and grooming skills. The universal impact of AAT techniques is that inmates are motivated to set and achieve goals. The discipline, dedication, respect, patience and the amount of knowledge that inmates gain by participating in the program enable them to obtain and keep a job (t5).

A prison based animal-training program is a win-win approach; it benefits the animals, inmates, community, institution and the nation as a whole. Previous studies, prison officials and staff are all in favor for the implementation of animal-training programs in prisons. Even after the inmates are released, BB will continue to conduct follow ups to monitor any success or failure of inmates being in an AAT program prior to release.