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PRISON ANIMAL PROGRAMS: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Since the inception of canine training programs in correctional facilities during the 1980s, evidence of effectiveness has been unexplored, leaving the questions of correctional staff and researchers alike unanswered. Systematic research exploring the long term effects of such programming has been scant; however, anecdotal reports from inmates, correctional employees, and recipients of inmate-trained service dogs have been copious and overwhelmingly positive.

In 1981 Sister Pauline Quinn, a Dominican nun first coupled dogs and inmates when she founded the primary prison dog-training program in Washington state. Sister Quinn recognized the therapeutic effects of dogs after one aided her own recovery during a psychiatric hospitalization. Soon after her program began in Washington, other states followed on the East coast, first at North Central Correctional Institute in Gardner, Massachusetts and shortly after in Maine (Gold, 2000). One year after the Maine program was founded, staff observed significantly decreased tensions in the prison and that the inmates were able to provide exceptionally trained dogs (Harkrader, Burke, & Owen, 2004).

Abundant research demonstrates the beneficial effects of animals on a multitude of groups, including children, individuals suffering from mental illness, and the elderly. Research suggests that the involvement of dogs in therapy can reduce depression and that simply petting companion animals may lower a person's blood pressure (Haynes, 1991; Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch & Messent, 1983; Levitt, 1988 as cited in Turner, 2007). In clinical studies examining severe coronary heart disease, pet ownership has repeatedly been identified as one of the strongest predictors of survival (Furst, 2006; Harkrader et al., 2004). Household pets have been found to bring social support and other psychological benefits not only to their owners but to whomever they interact with (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Flynn, 2000 as cited by Britton & Button, 2006). Fournier, Geller, and Fortney (2007) found that involvement in animal programming had a favorable effect on previously existing treatment programs and therapies in a prison setting. This finding supports prior research where the mere presence of an animal has been shown to expedite results of conventional physical, occupational and psychological therapies (Fick, 1993 as cited in Fournier, Geller and Fortney, 2007).

Of particular interest is research examining human-animal interaction programs involving nursing home and hospital residents who experience loneliness, helplessness, monotony, and deviant social behavior comparable to that of inmates (Ivanoff et al., 1992; Phillips, 2001 as cited in Fournier, Geller, & Fortney, 2007). While inmates and the elderly may not seem obviously

similar, they report many of the same grievances regarding their place in society: feeling socially isolated and forgotten. Incarcerated and elderly peoples state many of the same benefits of having an animal companion, “The elderly often feel as though they are unimportant; however, pets have a tendency to change this belief, providing... a sense of responsibility and self-importance” (Harkrader et al., 2004, 74).

Unfortunately, there is virtually no systematic research on the effects of animal programs; however, Furst (2006) did provide some information about these programs on a national scale and conducted a survey of 50 states’ departments of corrections and reported that 36 states have prison-based animal programming at 159 facilities. Of the 34 sites with service animal training, 80% involve the animal being in the inmate’s care 24 hours a day. Over half of the programs receive donations from prison staff, the public, and various stores such as Walmart, PetCo, and PetSmart. In many of the programs, annual checkups are performed free of charge by local vets, and food is donated by companies like Iams® and Purina®. One third of the responding agencies reported having knowledge of inmates formerly in the program who were working with animals in the community following their release. Of the 61 administrators surveyed, all but one responded they would recommend a prison-based animal program to other prison administrators. The administrator who did not recommend the program explained that he only answered as such because it had no financial gain for the institution.

While further systematic research and analysis are needed, the anecdotal reports from staff, inmates, and recipients of the service dogs are overwhelmingly positive; therefore, not surprisingly, animal training programs are becoming increasingly common in correctional facilities. The Joseph Harp Correctional Center, a medium security prison in Oklahoma, implemented a unique canine program, pairing depressed inmates with dogs. The results showed that, “Not only did the program decrease depression among those inmates, but the rates of aggression decreased among the inmates as well” (Turner, 2007, p.38). Other prison canine programs involve service dog training performed by inmates in the institutions. Many prisons are founding service dog training programs comparable to the NEADS (National Education for Assistance Dog Services) program which is currently implemented in several institutions of the Massachusetts Department of Correction. Evaluation of the service dog program at Kit Carson Correctional Center in Colorado has been promising. Since the beginning of the program, several changes have been noticeable including a positive morale boost among inmates and staff, as well as decreases in high blood pressure and anxiety in the dog handlers (Osborne & Bair, 2003, as cited in Turner, 2007). Oklahoma and Colorado are not unique in these findings, as budding service dog training programs in prisons around the country all seem to be reporting positive results.

In their study of human-animal interaction programs in prisons, Fournier, Geller and Fortney (2007) found improvement of social sensitivity (as measured by the Social Skills Inventory) in the treatment group, while scores dropped in the control group. “Social sensitivity...is defined as the ability to interpret verbal communication from others and sensitivity to norms governing appropriate social behavior” (p. 99). There are two explanations: firstly, that the inmates’ social sensitivity improved as a result of human-canine interaction or that the program prevented the decline of social sensitivity that would have occurred as a result of imprisonment. Another consideration is that inmates who are handlers report increased social interactions with inmates

and staff who are interested in their dogs, therefore giving them more chances to practice positive social interactions with strangers. It is not surprising that personal accounts from many of the programs note that inmates who are not involved as trainers can still benefit from having the chance to pet and interact with a dog, especially after years without animal interaction. Literature suggests that the dogs are more appreciated behind prison walls than in the outside world, providing inmates with an opportunity to interact with a living thing who will not judge them for their past mistakes (Arkow, 1998 as cited in Furst, 2006). The ability to “stimulate a kind of love and caring that is not poisoned or inhibited by the prisoners’ experiences with people” (Beck & Katcher, 1996, as cited in Furst 2006, p.412) is otherwise nonexistent in a prison-setting.

Some effects of the prison dog-training programs seem to be observed widely, but none so much as the quality of the dogs which are trained in the prisons. The New York program, Puppies Behind Bars, as with many other inmate training programs, has been found to be more successful than traditional trainers, “with 87% of the dogs trained by inmates being found fit to move on to more rigorous training, as compared with only 50% of those trained by volunteers outside the prison walls” (Harkrader et al., 77, 2004). Aside from the higher quality of training, the financial benefits of service dog training in prisons are massive, with inmate handlers’ receiving salaries of a few dollars a day or less. These costs are minimal compared to the salaries of professional trainers who prepare the service dogs on the outside, especially when considering that these trainers simply cannot dedicate the same amount of time to daily training as the inmates do.

Communities see the benefit of prison training programs in huge savings for the cost of training service dogs which can be expensive. Much of the literature hypothesizes that these clear benefits are part of the reason for the lack of systematic evidence despite these programs having existed for over 30 years. Many quotes describe the dog training programs using the term ‘win-win’. Some programs take dogs which have failed out of regular service dog training, or train dogs to be adoptable who are otherwise set to be euthanized. In the United States, nearly a quarter of a million healthy, adoptable dogs are euthanized annually (Protopopova, 2012, p. 61). Aside from providing some of these dogs a second chance at a happy life, these programs allow inmates to connect with another living thing and afford them the chance to give back to their communities. Many inmates’ testimonies reveal that their relationship with the assigned dog is the first real connection they have had with another living thing; Britton and Button (2006) found, “programs like these may in fact be one of the only ways for inmates to feel that they can somehow redress the harms caused by their actions” (p. 86). Having an opportunity to give back and to help a person in need are both common themes in inmate accounts from studies involving service dog training programs.

Existing studies’ greatest weakness is bias in the selection of inmate dog handlers. Many factors are closely examined including inmates’ institutional behavior, criminal records, and other factors. Perhaps the greatest challenge in executing a study with true experimental design is that it is extremely improbable that prison management would be willing to allow inmates to be randomly selected as dog trainers (Fournier, Geller, & Fortnoy, 2007). Many programs mandate that an inmate must have obtained no disciplinary reports to be considered. Applicants then undergo screening, selected for personality traits such as compassion and responsibility (Britton and Button, 2006). Under the current circumstances, any changes observed in the treatment

group could be attributed to their 'better' chances for success due to good behavior and desirable qualities. This careful selection of handlers makes it virtually impossible to present definite effects of the programs (Moneymaker & Strimple, 1991 as cited in Walsh and Mertin).

Nearly all literature examining dog training programs anecdotally reports that the programs are hugely successful. Unfortunately, statistical measures of the effects of these programs do not exist. This may be due in large part to the fact that to prison administrators, inmates, and dog recipients, the advantages are clear: reduced prison tensions and increased social interactions surrounding the dogs; development of valuable skills including patience, responsibility, compassion, and self-esteem; and well trained, low-cost service dogs to those in need. Additionally, many challenges exist in performing the type of statistical research that would be able to provide the answers to crucial questions: Do service dog training programs help reduce recidivism in participants? Are the inmate trainers able to find work as a result of these skills? Regardless of the lack of proven effects of prison dog-training programs on recidivism rates or institutional behavior, it is clear that these programs are making a difference, as reported by the inmates, prison staff, and the communities where they exist. The existing programs will grow, and likely continue to spread to new facilities. As unanimously stated by those examining this topic, more empirical research is not only recommended, but absolutely necessary to gain a precise view of the extent of the benefits of prison based animal programs, to improve on them, and to allow them to propagate.

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