

“Dogs Are Judgment Free Zones and They Are Full of Love”

Evaluation of the Comfort Dog Program

Office of the Plymouth County District Attorney

Leslie J. Sattler¹, Robert McMackin², Chloe Wojtowicz³

¹School of Social Work, Bridgewater State University

²Lemuel Shattuck Hospital Psychology Services

³Bridgewater State University

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Executive Summary

The Plymouth County District Attorney's Office (PCDAO) is committed to the protection and well-being of its citizens and collaborates with local, state, and federal partners to provide outreach and prevention efforts to address issues facing the county. One collaborative PCDAO initiative developed with Plymouth County police departments to address the opioid epidemic is the Comfort Dog Program, which fosters resiliency and well-being among high-risk youth through Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI).

AAI, particularly those using canines, have been demonstrated to reduce stress and anxiety, improve school performance, and promote behavioral and emotional well-being. PCDAO Comfort Dog Teams offer schools and community agencies individual, small group, and classroom-based interventions bi-weekly and as needed. Services also include crisis response to individuals, families, schools, and communities; school and community-wide programs via special events; and presence during regular community activities. This program began as a collaboration with one area police department three years ago, and due to how well it was received, it has expanded to nineteen communities. In an average month, comfort dogs and their handlers are present in over 30 schools, several councils on aging, and at numerous community events, where over 10,000 youth and others have been able to interact with the dogs and their handlers. Additionally, the dogs and their handlers have assisted in numerous crises each month and have made direct outreach to youth identified as at high risk due to drug exposure, domestic, or other stressful situations. All interventions have been done in collaboration with school or community personnel.

The PCDAO partnered with Bridgewater State University School of Social Work to evaluate program implementation and gather perspectives on the effectiveness of the Comfort Dog Program. The evaluation involved sending surveys and conducting focus groups with handlers and adults who have observed Comfort Dog teams in action. Observational results confirm that interaction with comfort dogs improves resiliency and well-being by building skills of emotion regulation and coping, managing stress, maintaining focus and motivation, and processing grief. The Comfort Dog Program brings together a diverse group of community members to build relationships, foster community well-being, increase a sense of community pride, and build positive relationships between youth and law enforcement, allowing officers to make more effective referrals. Additionally, 93% of participants agree that the program

contributes to a positive climate, while handlers report that the Comfort Dog Program fosters intra and interdepartmental relationships and collaboration between members of law enforcement and other first responders.

Central to the Comfort Dog Program is the unique ability of the dogs to provide unconditional, nonjudgmental love and support to individuals in need. This assists those served by the program to better regulate their emotions, cope with stress, and engage in appropriate behavior to build resiliency and well-being: protective factors that reduce the risk of substance misuse by giving youth the tools to manage the stress in their lives.

All dogs and handlers that participate in the program go through extensive training, but due to the newness of the program and its rapid expansion, consideration should be given to standardizing training requirements, program services and design, how the program is introduced and delivered each intervention site, ensuring funding streams for program sustainability, and supporting the long-term health of the dogs.

Specifically, we recommend:

- ***Selecting settings with a handler dedicated to the site and, in partnership with site personnel, identifying one or two evidence-based interventions to deliver consistently over time.*** Doing so will improve the quality of service, address stakeholder demand for consistent services, allow for further program assessment using baseline and outcome data, and meet the goals of building skills needed to prevent substance misuse.
- ***A multi-pronged messaging campaign*** to inform county stakeholders of the program's purpose and services provided to cement the interest and support necessary for program integration and longevity. Stakeholders request written materials and in-person orientation to the program.
- ***Standardizing training and aligning it with guidelines set out by industry experts.*** We encourage the Comfort Dog program to partner with leaders in the AAI industry in this effort.
- ***Increase administrative buy-in across stakeholder groups.*** Active engagement with and orientation of local school and agency administrators is necessary to generate enthusiasm and commitment to integrating program services.
- ***Acquiring appropriate funding to extend support and healthcare of the dog through retirement, streamline handler roles, and provide long-term program stability.***

Introduction

This program evaluation focused on the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office (PCDAO) Comfort Dog Program. We evaluated the implementation of the program at its current stage and gathered the perceptions of effectiveness from adults who observed the work of the handler and comfort dog teams. In this report, we aim to tell the story of the Comfort Dog Program, beginning with its humble history, describing the services provided, sharing the perceptions of those involved in the program, and reflecting on its potential growth. This report is structured in five sections. Section 1 provides background information on the program, stakeholder interaction and engagement, the evaluation team, and evaluation goals and objectives. Section 2 provides the reader with a view of the methods involved in conducting the evaluation, collecting, and analyzing data. In Section 3, we offer a comprehensive review of the results, complete with graphs, tables, and narrative samples of participant perceptions. Section 4 discusses the meaning of those results and outlines recommendations for future program growth. Finally, Section 5 provides supporting information in the form of references, tables, graphs, and data collection instruments. We provide an Executive Summary before presenting each section. This summary provides a synopsis of the report, offering important findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Feel free to read all parts of this report or any of those sections of most interest. However, if time is short, the Executive Summary provides the most pertinent information.

Section One

Program Background and Purpose

The Plymouth County District Attorney's Office (PCDAO) Comfort Dogs Program aims to aid law enforcement within the county in their efforts to identify and support those impacted by anxiety, mental illness, illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs. Comfort Dog Teams serve schools and the community to enhance resilience, community response, and support those impacted by substance use. The program began with one dog in 2021, consisted of 14 dogs in October 2023, and has continued to develop. At the time of this report, the program consists of 22 comfort dogs, with 18 in service and four in the initial training phase. This evaluation focuses on the initial 14 comfort dogs in active service.

Animal-Assisted Interventions and the Comfort Dog Program

The Comfort Dog Program provides services falling under the larger category of Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI). Defined as "a goal-oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education, and human services for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans" (Jegatheesan, IAHAIO White Paper, p. 5, 2018), AAI aim to improve human well-being and resilience. Interventions include crisis response, skill-building efforts to enhance behavioral, cognitive, mental, and physical health, and provision of supportive activities that range from meeting daily living needs to providing general comfort (Bert et al., 2016 & 2020; Brelsford et al., 2020; O'Haire, 2015). Forms of AAI include Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) targeting therapeutic interventions in structured situations with licensed clinicians, Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) consisting of less structured interactions such as pet visits to nursing homes (Bert et al., 2016), Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR) providing a trauma-informed response of support and comfort in situations of individual and community crisis, (Graham, 2009; Lass-Hennemann et al., 2018), and Animal Assisted Education (AAE) planned and structured intervention delivered with education related service professionals in educational settings (Brelsford, et al., 2020; Jagatheesan, IAHAIO, 2018). The PCDAO Comfort Dog Program straddles many of these categories in that they provide services in educational settings, respond to crises, and engage in less structured pet visit situations.

Research reporting on the delivery and effectiveness of AAI suggests a range of positive physical, psychological, and social outcomes for individuals who receive such interventions. Biologically, AAI have been seen to increase levels of oxytocin, a hormone responsible for

producing positive feelings that influence social interactions and promotes psychological stability (LeWine, 2023; Meints et al., 2022; Petersson et al., 2017) and decreases levels of the stress response hormone, cortisol (Beetz et al., 2012; Meints et al., 2022; Petersson et al., 2017). AAI also strengthen psychological functioning by improving mood and reducing anxiety and PTSD symptomatology (Hamama et al., 2011; Lass Henneman et al., 2018; Nepps et al., 2014; O'Haire et al., 2015). Further, AAI as a crisis response decreases anxiety and negative affect, which lowers subjectivity in reporting, supports rapport with investigators in forensic settings, and allows for increased detail of negative events (Capparelli et al., 2019; Lass-Henneman, 2018). Research also suggests that AAI foster empathy, improves social skills, behavioral control and emotional well-being, increases coping and resilience, and promotes prosocial interactions by reducing verbal and physical aggression (Bert et al., 2016; Brelsford et al., 2017; Lasa et al., 2015; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Nurenberg et al., 2015; O'Haire et al., 2015).

Research examining the effects of AAI on school settings reports similar findings. Students participating in AAI demonstrate improved respect, responsibility, and attitude toward school and learning, with some students reporting that they come to school because of AAI (Baird et al., 2023; Beetz, 2013; Brelsford et al., 2017). Research also indicates improved academic performance via improved attention to the teacher, increased recall and ability to follow through with instructions, increased reading rates, accuracy, and comprehension, and decreased test anxiety (Brelsford et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2010; Jarolmen & Patel, 2018; Reynolds & Rabschultz, 2011). Further, findings suggest that AAI support social functioning in school with students demonstrating improved social skills, emotion regulation, and self-confidence (Baird et al., 2023; Kotrschal & Ortbauer, 2003; Schuck et al., 2018; Tissen et al., 2007; Wintermantel et al., 2024). Finally, AAI in school settings improve school climate as students demonstrate more compassion and an ethic of caring and ownership for their school community (Mombeck & Albers, 2024; Weinbaum & Pruitt, 2021)

Research on AAI also indicate a positive effect on first responders, military veterans, and law enforcement. For military veterans and their families, benefits include reduced PTSD symptomatology, decreased depression, improved quality of life and psychosocial well-being, communication, and relationship bonding (Chirico et al, 2022; Fonseka et al, 2022; Nieforth and Leighton, 2024.) The benefits for law enforcement and first responders include improved sleep

quality, well-being, mood, and a reduction of PTSD symptomology and stress levels (Binfet, Drapper, and Green, 2020; Green, 2017).

Resiliency, Well-being, and the Comfort Dog Program

In their delivery of AAI, the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program plays a central role in the county's effort, via the COSSUP grant, to mitigate and prevent substance misuse in its citizens by supporting resiliency and well-being. While extensive research documents the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the negative health outcomes of mental illness, behavioral difficulties, and substance misuse (Broekhof et al., 2023; Merrick et al., 2019), research also demonstrates the importance and frequency of resilience in responses to ACEs (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). Many definitions exist to define resiliency, including the ability to bounce back from adverse life experiences (Southwick et al., 2014), "a pattern of stable functioning" over time following a traumatic event (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009; Bonanno, 2004), and a process to harness resources to sustain well-being (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013). In short, resiliency is a pattern of stable functioning, aided by individual and community-based resources, that support coping with and responding to adverse life events.

Supporting resiliency and well-being are protective factors, which are two primary foci of the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program. These factors decrease the likelihood of negative behavioral health outcomes and include educational attainment, positive belief systems, coping skills, and emotional expression style that exist within the individual, while other factors are external (e.g., supportive family, relationship with a caring adult, and community safety; Bonanno & Diminich, 2013; Kim-Cohen et al., 2004; Mancini & Bonanno, 2013; Sieving et al., 2017). Moreover, many of these resiliency-supporting factors play a protective role in preventing substance misuse. Such factors include coping skills that support emotional regulation and behavioral self-control, engagement in school, and relationships with caring adults with whom one can talk (Griffin & Botvin, 2010; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Shahbazirad & Azizi, 2018). As the research outlined above suggests, AAI, such as provided by the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program, enhances protective socio-emotional functioning that is central to a resilient response to adverse experiences and may prevent substance misuse.

Evaluation Rationale

The Plymouth County District Attorney's Office Comfort Dog Program contracted with Bridgewater State University School of Social Work in October of 2023 for an evaluation of its

Comfort Dog Program Specifically, the PCDAO sought to understand the implementation and effectiveness of the Comfort Dog Program in addressing the well-being of Drug Endangered Children, students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), truancy, and those in the community impacted by anxiety, mental illness, illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs. Currently, Comfort Dog teams serve schools and the community by responding to requests from community stakeholders for services (e.g., responding to crises, visiting classrooms, intervening with dysregulated youth), and have not yet developed structured services targeting specific needs that are measurable for effectiveness. Therefore, due to the program's early stage of development, this evaluation is not a formal outcome evaluation. Instead, this is a process evaluation reporting on the program's implementation and includes preliminary data on the perceived effectiveness of the program as identified by adult stakeholders who observed comfort dog interventions. This evaluation examines the work of the initial 14 Comfort Dog/Handler Teams, occurred from January -June 2024 and is funded by the PCDAO (\$64,347.00).

Evaluation Team

The evaluation team consists of three members; Primary Investigator, Leslie J. Sattler, Ph.D., LICSW, Consultant, Robert McMackin Ed.D., and Research Assistant, Chloe Wojtowicz MSW. All members of the research team are external to the PCDAO and the Comfort Dog Program. Leslie J. Sattler, Ph.D., LICSW is an Associate Professor at Bridgewater State University School of Social Work, and Chloe Wojtowicz is a recent graduate of Bridgewater State University College of Graduate Studies. There are no known conflicts of interest among members of the evaluation team. For biographical information see [Appendix A](#).

Stakeholder Identification and Engagement

Stakeholders involved in the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program include the staff of the PCDAO, law enforcement officers in the Plymouth County Sheriff's Office, local law enforcement officers serving as handlers and their respective Chiefs of Police, public school personnel including district superintendents, school principals and other administrative personnel (e.g., Director of Student Services, Special Education), school psychologists, school counselors and teachers, and administrators from local agencies such as Council on Aging, Community Services, libraries, and hospitals. The research team members interacted with the stakeholders in person, via Zoom meetings and email, and by telephone throughout the study.

Meetings were held with the PCDAO staff members in the Fall of 2023 to create the memorandum of understanding, in February 2024 to review the Comfort Dog Program Logic Model (Appendix B) and aid in evaluation planning, in April/May 2024 to prepare for and present at a local conference, and in June 2024 to review preliminary findings and discuss the reporting process. Communication also occurred monthly via phone calls and emails.

Meetings with handlers of the Comfort Dogs occurred throughout the winter and spring of 2024. The primary investigator met with the Comfort Dog Program lead handlers, Tom Ford and Derek Harrington, throughout the study process via Zoom meetings, in person, by email, and by telephone. This investigator also watched recorded handler meetings and met each of the 14 handlers via Zoom or phone before meeting with them in person. Meetings with handlers involved learning about the program, shadowing the handlers as they went about their work, and observing comfort dog interactions with students and community members.

Finally, the primary investigator met with individual stakeholders (e.g., school personnel including district superintendents, school principals and other administrative personnel, school psychologists, school counselors and teachers, and administrators from local agencies such as Council on Aging, Community Services, Boys and Girls Club, libraries, and hospitals) in each of the 14 communities with a Comfort Dog in service at the time of the study. These meetings, occurring before the official collection of study data, served as an opportunity to build relationships and inform study design. Information sought during these meetings included inquiring about the individual's role and experience with the Comfort Dog Program, their perceptions of the program and its outcomes, and their thoughts on future program development.

Program Description

As described on the PCDAO Comfort Dog Website, "the mission and purpose of the Plymouth County Comfort Dogs Program is to provide comfort and emotional support for the well-being of Drug Endangered Children, students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and others that require this service within the Plymouth County community." The program was designed in response to the opioid crisis affecting Plymouth County to provide support to and build resiliency and well-being in community members who have witnessed or been affected by the related overdoses and deaths.

Initiated in 2021 with one dog serving Hingham, MA, the Comfort Dog Program has grown under the steadfast support of Plymouth County District Attorney Timothy Cruz. First

funded via a mini-grant by the PCDAO, the Comfort Dog Program grew to include 18 dogs when the DOJ approved the reallocation of \$447,000 from the DOJ/COSSUP Drug Endangered Children's Initiative Grant for training, equipment, and support of the comfort dogs. The program recently expanded to include 22 dogs, with 18 currently in service and four undergoing the initial training.

Comfort Dog Program handlers include local School Resource or Community Outreach Officers who, along with their comfort dogs, serve their local communities and belong to a regional response team. Of the 22 Comfort Dog Program handler teams, 18 dogs work in Plymouth County K-12 school settings, and four dogs work outside these settings: two servicing Bridgewater State University, one serving Plymouth County Sheriff's Department visiting local hospitals and nursing facilities, and another servicing the Marshfield Boys and Girls Club. Comfort Dog Program services are provided locally in the schools and the community both night and day. In addition, as part of the regional response team, comfort dog teams provide mutual aid to communities in crisis, provide comfort services at the Children's Advocacy Center, and attend community events across Plymouth County. All handler and dog teams undergo extensive, regular training and are certified to qualify as a "comfort/therapy/community resource dog."

Services provided by the Comfort Dog Program in schools consist of greeting students as they arrive at school, visiting specially contained classrooms for children with behavioral and cognitive needs, providing stress relief to students prior to standardized testing, comforting children experiencing an acute personal crisis or a community crisis, supporting students experiencing emotional dysregulation so that they can return to the classroom, and being a member of the school community through their presence in shared spaces (e.g., library, cafeteria, lobby, hallways). Comfort Dog Program teams also service community members by responding to calls at citizen residences (e.g., health, mental health, domestic situations), attending community events (e.g., town meetings, athletic contests, community celebrations), and comforting victims and survivors of individual or community crises.

Key Evaluation Questions/Focus

PCDAO sought this evaluation to answer two overarching questions. How is the Comfort Dog Program functioning? What is its effectiveness? Therefore, the focus of this process evaluation is threefold to 1) identify and examine the implementation of the Comfort Dog Program, including program inputs, activities, and outputs; 2) to identify short-term outcomes as

perceived by stakeholders who observed or experienced program services; 3) to offer recommendations for further program modifications, expansion, and service provision.

Section Two

Methods

Design

We conducted a convergent mixed-method process evaluation consisting of online surveys and virtual focus groups to assess the implementation of the comfort dog program and explore initial perceptions of its effectiveness from adults who observed the dogs at work providing services to individuals, groups, and schools, responding to community crises and participating in community events.

We met with key stakeholders to reach a consensus on the project goals, develop a logic model, and identify the sample population. Participants in this process included officials from the PCDAO, 14 handlers representing law enforcement departments within the county, school superintendents, principals, and department administrators, and local agency administrators from area Councils on Aging, nursing homes, and hospitals. Throughout the evaluation, we met with PCDAO officials and handlers to share information and confer on the next steps in the evaluation process. This study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) approvals from Bridgewater State University.

Sampling procedures

We gathered the sample using purposive and snowball sampling. First, we developed the sample frame by asking handlers to identify adults who observed the dogs at work with children and other community members. The sample frame included 134 individuals occupying the roles of handler, principal, teacher, school counselor, and community agency administrator. We sent letters of solicitation and a link to a survey to everyone on the sample frame and invited principals to share this information with school personnel familiar with the program. We sent out 134 invitations, and 81 people participated in the survey.

Six focus groups were held. All handlers, due to their firsthand experience with the program, were invited to participate in two of the focus groups. The remaining four focus groups were for counselors, administrators, and teachers. Participants were selected by using a simple random sampling method. For each focus group, we invited 8-12 individuals sharing the same role (e.g., teachers, school counselors, school principals, and agency administrators) to participate. Focus group participants received an email consisting of a letter of solicitation and an informed consent document. We invited participants to contact the primary investigator with

questions before signing the informed consent. After receipt of the signed informed consent, we emailed participants information about the focus group and a link to the virtual meeting. Of the 50 focus group invitations, 26 individuals participated in the focus groups.

Sample

The sample consisted of 81 participants, with the majority of the participants identifying as white (95%), female (78%), owning a dog (71%), and either observed or participated in AAI in the past (69%). Participants held the roles of Comfort Dog Handler (14%), Teacher (27%), School Counselor (26%), Principal (15%), Librarian (5%), local agency administrator (11%), and other (2%) with the majority working in a school setting (74%) and occupying their current role for less than ten years (61%). For more detailed sample demographics see [Table C1, Appendix C](#).

Measures & Data Collection Procedures

Instruments

We employed multiple measures to collect data, including two surveys, a monthly log of services, and a semi-structured interview guide. We review each measure in the paragraphs below.

The Comfort Dog Program Survey. This survey consisted of 35 multiple choice and open-response questions modeled, in part, on a format used by Green and Binfet (2021; see [Appendix D1](#)). Questions were developed and reviewed by three members of the research team. We did not pretest this instrument. Questions on the survey gathered demographic data and participant reports regarding the training of and interaction with the handler, perceptions of the Comfort Dog Program's effectiveness in calming students, supporting a positive climate and learning environment, and fostering focus and motivation for task completion. Role-specific questions included referrals made for services, perception of the effectiveness of interventions for the referrals (asked of handlers, teachers, counselors, and agency administrators), and perception of the program's influence on transitions back to school after an extended absence, frequency of disciplinary incidents, and time spent in the office after a disciplinary incident (asked of principals). We measured multiple-choice questions using Likert-type five-point scales measuring the level of agreement (e.g., strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). Open-ended response questions prompted respondents to elaborate on questions

regarding the impact of the program on the organization, the effectiveness of referrals, and perceptions of the mechanisms of the interaction that support mood or behavior change, benefits of the program, areas for improvement, and concerns about the program. We distributed this survey to participants via Qualtrics using an online link sent via email. We required survey participants to answer a consent question before starting the survey. The survey was anonymous in that no identifying information was requested, but Qualtrics software captured IP addresses.

The Training Survey. This survey required Handlers to identify (yes/no) their participation in six different training programs supported by the PCDAO, such as the American Kennel Club Puppy Star and Good Citizen training series, the Standardized Public Access Test, Crisis Intervention Training, SAMSHA online Trauma Training and individualized training. Handlers were also asked to answer 11 questions measuring their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale. These questions gathered data on handler perception of their training, including applicability, affordability, and value of the training, preparation for their work, format and time offered, appropriateness of facilities, and the responsiveness of the trainers to handler needs and feedback (see [Appendix D2](#)). The survey was developed by the research team and was reviewed by the lead handlers before distribution. We distributed and collected the survey via email. Data were aggregated into one document, and all identifying information was omitted.

Monthly Comfort Dog Handler Documentation Log. This log measured the program activities identified by stakeholders and presented in the logic model. The log required Handlers to record the number of times they offered a service each month from September 2023 through May 2024. These activities included the training attended, social media interaction, creation of advertising materials, interactions with individuals and children identified as Handle with care, visits to schools, classrooms, local agencies, and hospitals, engagement in community events, and responding to crises (see [Appendix D3](#)). We distributed this log via email. Data were aggregated into one document, and all identifying information was omitted.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. We gathered data from the focus groups using a semi-structured interview guide. The research team developed this instrument. It consisted of six questions measuring participant role and involvement in the Comfort Dog Program, their

observations of interactions between dogs and individuals or groups, their thoughts on what is most useful in these interactions, how they think the interaction works, areas of the program needing improvement and necessary components in designing such a program (see [Appendix D4](#)). We asked follow-up questions based on participant responses, and at the end of the focus group, invited participants to share any other thoughts.

Focus Groups

We gathered data vis-à-vis six online focus groups using the Zoom platform. We modeled focus group protocols after that presented by Brown (2022). Focus groups lasted 60-90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed by Zoom. All identifying information was deleted from transcriptions. The focus groups comprised individuals randomly selected from the overall sample who occupied a similar role (e.g., handlers, teachers, counselors, principals, agency administrators) and consented to participate. Protocols for the focus groups involved communicating via email with participants two times before the group. We provided the dates and times of each group, a link for them to test before the day of the group, the limits of confidentiality, and the expected protocol. We asked participants to join each group from a private location, to ensure no interruptions or distractions during the session, to remain on camera throughout the group session, and to answer each question. We reviewed the protocols and limits of confidentiality at the start of each focus group and used a six-question semi-structured interview guide to gather data during the focus group.

Data Process Procedures and Analysis

Using a convergent mixed methods design we gathered quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously and analyzed such data separately. Quantitative data gathered via the Comfort Dog Program Survey, were collected and computed via the Qualtrics platform. We report only descriptive statistics as no bivariate or multi-variate statistical tests were conducted.

Data gathered via the Training Survey and Monthly Comfort Dog Handler Documentation Log were cleaned and tabulated by the research team using Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data collected via the focus groups and open-response survey questions were coded by the research team using thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three researchers participated in multiple rounds of analysis. Three coding rounds focused on developing a finalized code list. Each researcher conducted an initial read and generation of codes before meeting to review the codes, identify themes emerging in the data, and generate an

initial code list. We conducted a second coding round using the code list and resolved disagreements by discussing our interpretations before identifying the final list of codes. To ensure interrater reliability, we met together and coded four transcripts using the final code list. After establishing such reliability, we coded the remaining transcripts and all open-ended survey response questions. We tabulated how many times each theme appeared in the data and wrote descriptions for each theme. We triangulated our findings by comparing themes between researchers during the coding process and by comparing final themes to the corresponding quantitative data.

After the quantitative and qualitative data were independently processed and analyzed, the team synthesized the findings of each. We then considered our synthesis of the data within the context of the program-identified goals and standards. Doing so resulted in our interpretation of results, justifying our conclusions, and making recommendations for future growth.

Limitations

Limitations to this program evaluation include issues of research design. Specifically, the design itself was dictated by the current stage of the program's implementation, and we could not gather data that assessed for intervention effectiveness (e.g., pre and post-testing) because the program was underway when the study began and did not consist of standardized services across study locations. In addition, drawing a purposive sample was appropriate to answer the research questions but limits the generalizability of findings to the participants who answered the survey and attended the focus groups. Moreover, the lack of data collected from the recipients of program services limits our understanding of program effectiveness to participants who observed the services but were not the primary recipients of them. Another limitation involves the use of qualitative data. Although this approach matched the study's aims to understand the participants' perceptions regarding program effectiveness, such data does not allow for advanced statistical testing wherein we can draw inferences about effectiveness. Moreover, our use of descriptive statistics vs bivariate or multi-variate testing also limits our inferences from the data.

Section Three

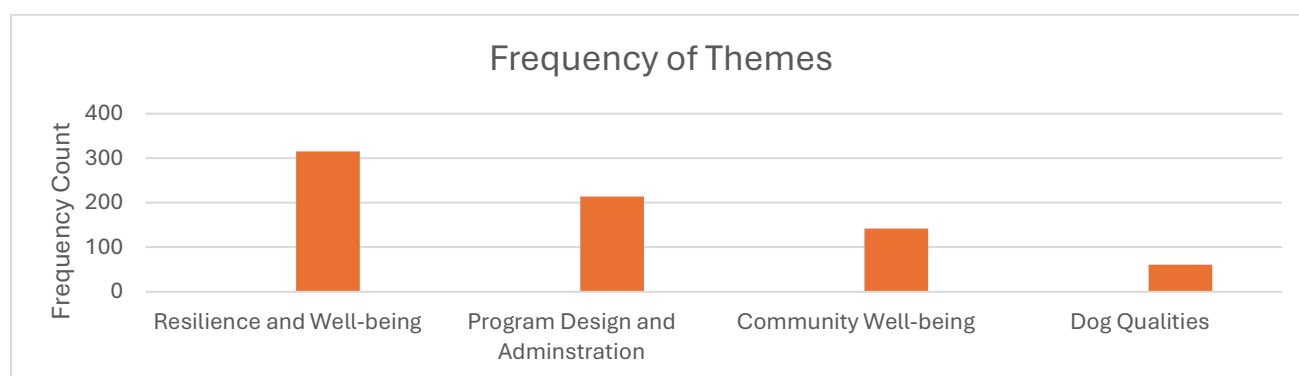
Results

Overview of Results

Conducting a convergent mixed-method design of data collection using surveys and focus groups allowed us to gather, analyze, and synthesize quantitative and qualitative data. For ease of presentation, we present the results according to the themes that emerged in the data, presenting the relevant quantitative data followed by an explanation of that theme as identified in the qualitative data. The themes that surfaced in the data are resilience and well-being, program design and administration, community well-being, and dog qualities (Figure 1). Before presenting these themes, we provide an overview of the program design and delivery of services.

Figure 1

Frequency of Themes



Program Design and Delivery of Services

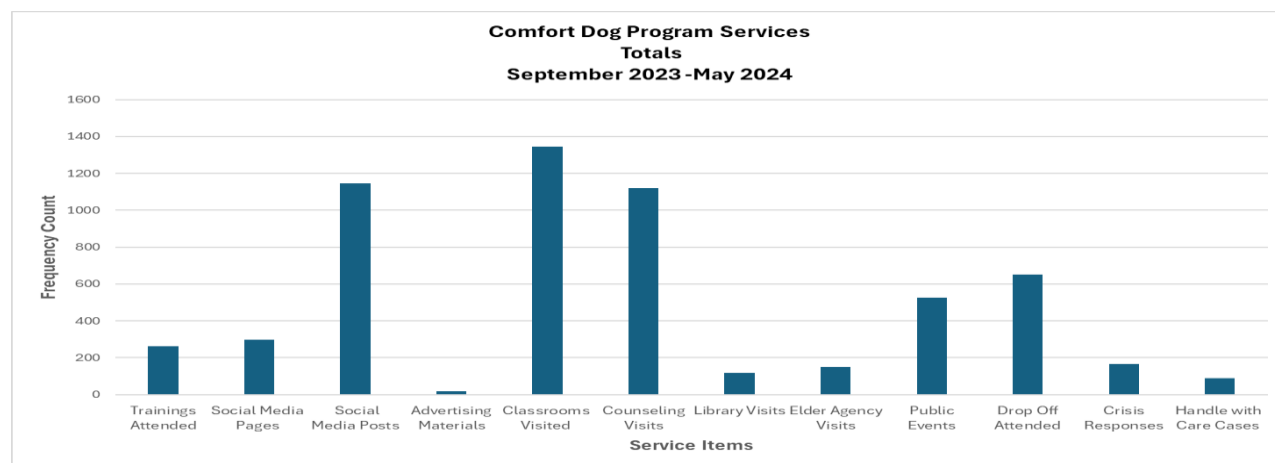
As outlined in the Program Description, as designed, the Comfort Dog Program aims to provide comfort and support for the well-being of children and community members affected by adverse childhood experiences and the damaging effects of drug misuse. In doing so, the array of services is broad and reflects a responsiveness to local and county needs. Handlers report providing services in school settings (walking hallways, providing office hours, visiting classrooms and counseling offices, meeting with individuals in crises), responding to calls to residences, attending community events, responding to crises, visiting hospitals, nursing homes, council on aging and a local Boys and Girls Club, and supporting EMS personnel. The handler's professional role greatly influences service type, frequency, and consistency. For example, School Resource Officers typically provide most of their services in schools, whereas Community Resource Officers, Sergeants, and Sheriff's Office personnel visit local community

agencies and service schools as time allows. All handlers participate in community events and respond to community crises. The type and frequency of interaction during these services are tailored to the local setting and are neither uniformly structured nor delivered in the same manner within or across sites. The logic model in Appendix B displays the overall program design, including the range of services, activities, and proposed outcomes. Below, we provide a graph of the services recorded by handlers from September 2023 through May 2024.

Figure 2 reflects the total number of services provided by handlers over the nine month reporting period. A further breakdown of this data, displayed in [Table C2, Appendix C](#), indicates that on average each month Comfort Dog Handlers attended 29 trainings, maintained 33 social media pages, and made 127 posts per month. Each month, they visited an average of 150 classrooms and 124 counseling offices, 12 libraries and 16 elder agencies, attended 58 public events, responded to 19 community crises, and attended to 10 Handle With Care referrals. One handler also visits hospitals monthly. Not reflected in this graph are 11,178 individuals, on average, served each month.

Figure 2

Comfort Dog Program Services Total



Training

Comfort Dog handlers attend a variety of trainings with most attending the core seven required ([Appendix C, Table C3](#)). These seven include the AKC puppy and canine good citizen series, a standardized public access test, crisis intervention training, a SAMSHA online training, and individualized training. Of note, due to the sourcing of the individual dogs, some handler/comfort dog teams do not participate in the AKC Puppy Star training because the dogs

receive that level of training from the source. Overall, handlers report the in-person training as helpful or most helpful and are neutral as to the helpfulness of the online training.

Handlers agree or strongly agree that training helps prepare them for their work, is responsive to their needs, and is supported by their departments. Table 1 provides a summary of how handlers view the training they receive.

Table 1

Level of Agreement in Training Quality (n=9)

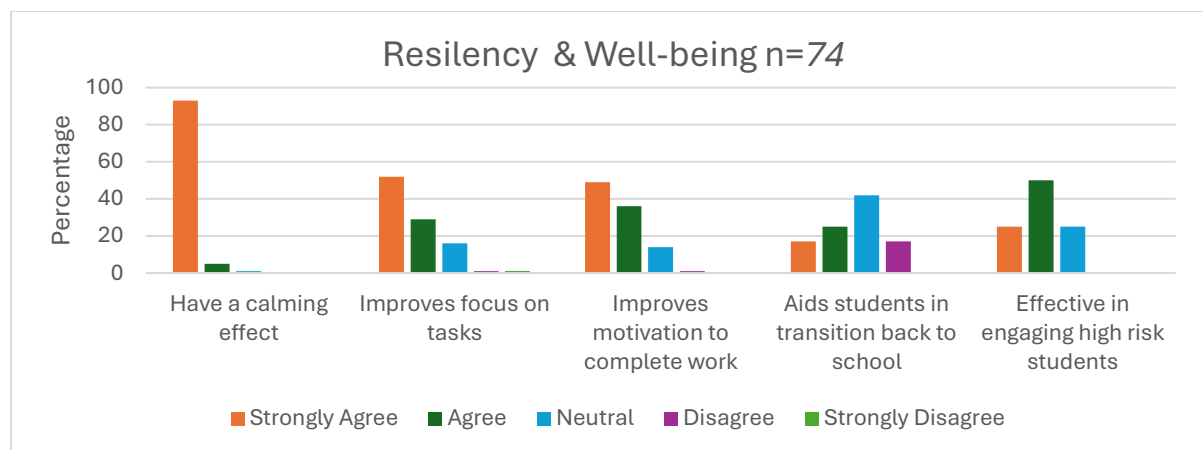
Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Preparation for work				1	8
Training times fit my schedule				5	4
Training is affordable			2	2	5
Online training is applicable to my work			5	2	1
Training is a good value		1	1	3	4
I have department support to attend training				2	7
Training format is easily understood			1	3	5
Trainers are responsive to my needs				2	7
Trainers respond to my feedback and input				2	7
Training facilities are appropriate			1	3	5
Trainers are accessible between sessions				4	5
Training helps me understand my limits				5	4
Written training materials supplement training			6	1	2
Written materials helpful in developing skills		1	5	1	2

Resiliency and Well-being

A review of Figure 3 indicates that most participants strongly agree or agree that interaction with the Comfort Dog Program supports student functioning in school. Data gathered from the open-response questions and focus groups further elaborates on these findings as participants described numerous ways the program comfort dogs help individuals build the skills needed for resiliency and well-being. These skills fall into the categories of emotion regulation and coping, managing stress, focus and motivation, and processing grief are presented below.

Figure 3

Resiliency and Well-being



Emotion Regulation and Coping

Participants shared that engagement with program comfort dogs helps individuals learn to identify and process their emotions and develop positive forms of coping. For example, many participants shared that the comfort dog helps their students self-regulate when anxious. At the same time, another reported that their students who have a history of trauma "are able to settle quickly when the comfort dog is around." As students self-regulate, they then develop positive coping skills needed to manage their emotions. For example, one handler shared how a student requested his comfort dog to help her cope with the emotions triggered by a police call to her home over the weekend.

This student was hesitant to open up, but as soon as [Dog's name] got there, she just melted down.... [Dog's name] put one paw on her lap, and that was enough for [her] to feel comfortable to let her emotions go and not keep them bottled up. [She] was then able to open up to us which then helped [her] deal with [her] emotions.

Students use the dog to regulate their emotions and cope in various ways. For example:

We have had some scary and emotional incidents that impacted the students either as a whole or individually, depending on the situation. When these situations have come about, the students have become so familiar with our comfort dog they ask to have her come When she arrives with her officer the student or students will immediately sit on the ground and, place a hand on her back, and just sit with her.

Managing Stress

Engagement with program comfort dogs also helps individuals learn to manage stress as, according to one participant, "it has such a calming, regulating, grounding impact on a student experiencing symptoms of anxiety or stress." Participants offer many examples of how the dogs supported individuals in managing the stress associated with crises, being in the hospital, and

when police respond to 911 domestic calls. One handler shared that during a medical call involving an unconscious adult caregiver, he was able to help the children manage the stress of this situation by engaging them in a game of fetch with his comfort dog. Finally, handlers report that dogs provide comfort for survivors of traumatic events, "they're kind of just talking to her (the dog), interacting with her, and getting to a point where they're calm enough to kind of tell us not only what happened, but how we can best help them."

Participants also shared how engagement with the dogs helps individuals manage the stress of school. For students who struggle to come to school daily, the comfort dogs can help them come into the building, One school counselor observed,

The dog and her handler stand outside with us some mornings for parent drop-off. I see students light up when greeted by our comfort dog in the morning. Many students who struggle with anxiety, which impacts their attendance, are dropped off and I know seeing the dog and interacting with her helps them transition into their day.

This stress management also extends to taking standardized tests as one handler noted.

I was in one of the classrooms that was doing [standardized testing] this morning. And I actually got a message from our principal a couple of hours later. And he just wanted to thank me from the teacher saying that you know that the stress levels were high for a lot of the kids.... She said it was a complete shift in the mood inside the classroom and ...it definitely helped with the pretest anxiety.

Increasing Focus and Motivation

Participants report that program comfort dogs "hold a very valuable place in the classroom" with 91% (n=74) agreeing that interactions increase students' ability to focus and 85% (n=74) agreeing they provide motivation to stay in the classroom and complete work. In short, the comfort dogs are "a great tool and motivator for the students!" For example, when one student struggled with motivation to complete a chapter assessment, "we offered a visit with [Dog's name as soon as the test was complete, the student perked up and got through the entire test! And scored above average!" Increased motivation is especially true for students who struggle to come and stay in school, "if they know it's the day the dog's coming, they will show up to school."

Interaction with program comfort dogs may serve as "a reward for students struggling with meeting academic expectations" with some pointing to the grounding nature of the interaction that allows students to "refocus and get back to work." As one school staff person explains, "Kids will get on the ground and pet her for a few minutes then will return to their

class/tasks. The dog gives people a boost to get through their days in a better space." While another stated, "I have also seen students who struggle with attention difficulties benefit from spending a few moments with [Dog's name] and then being able to refocus and attend to their assignments." Or, as shared by a handler regarding a young person who struggled to stay in class, "I'll... meet up with the kid, and he just breaks right down, goes down pets the dog and we get him right back on track. He goes right back in the class and gets right back to it." Finally, the comfort dogs also support self-expression "for students who struggle socially and/or academically, the dog gives them a different way to express themselves and feel successful."

Processing Grief

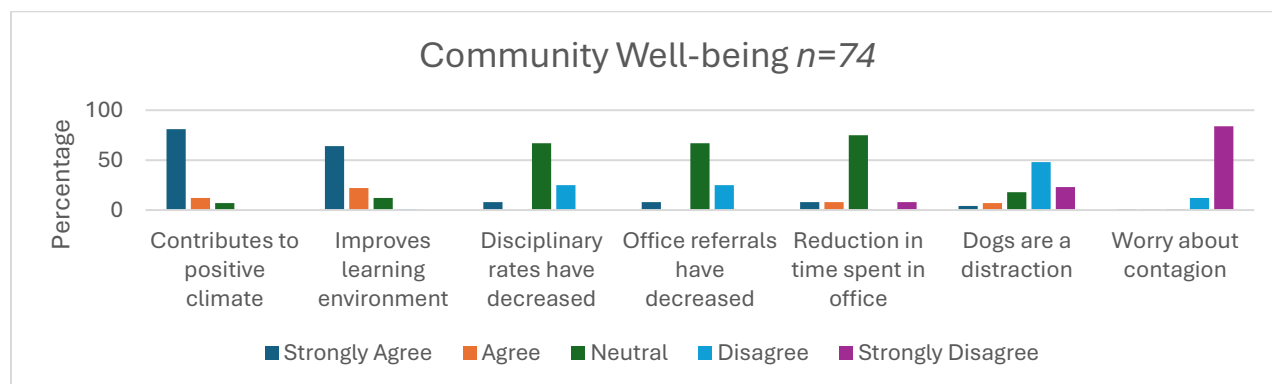
Participants stated that the comfort dogs provided opportunities to teach individuals about death and support them in processing their grief. One counselor shared how the death of a former comfort dog prompted a discussion about death with one boy who had never processed his grief surrounding losses he had experienced, "And so, having a conversation about losing a dog, losing [Dog's name] really opened the door to more conversations." Likewise, a teacher pointed to the role comfort dogs played in helping her class process the death of a classmate.

... Some of the kids that were very close to the student who passed away also struggled with a lot of the baggage at home, so they didn't know ... what to say or how to react. And I noticed ... one girl in particular she would just go every day and just lay down with the town's comfort dog and you could just see the sense of like peace go over her while she was laying there with the dog. ...it almost was like a way for her to feel loved in that moment without needing to talk about it.

Community Well-being

Figure 4

Community Well-being



As indicated in Figure 4, most participants strongly agree or agree that interaction with the dogs induces positive emotions that foster a positive climate (93% agree), improves the

learning environment (86% agree), and increases community well-being. For example, members of all the groups we spoke to (e.g., principals, counselors, teachers, community agency leaders, and handlers) described the effect of the dogs as producing "joy," "smiles," and "happiness" and that, "it created "togetherness" between members." One member explained, "It's just joy of seeing the dog, and you know, I think it just kinda makes everybody's day better, mine included." One participant shared that the "comfort dogs make the environment more welcoming," while another explained how the dog's presence contributes to creating an overall positive school environment:

She'll start in the office,... and people come out of their offices to say hi to her, and she'll do her tricks and get belly rubs, and then they'll kind of work their way down the hallway, and it's just joy following them wherever they go.

Likewise, the program comfort dogs serve as a gathering point, opening the door for conversation; "if the dog is present, then they will go into spaces with other students that they typically wouldn't go to. They'll be a lot more talkative than they typically are." Further, the dogs promote a sense of community pride, provide "a great way for different people to connect," and "brings the whole community together." One handler shared that when arriving at a T-ball game,

All the kids could see her out the back window and her name on my car. And it was just a wave of kids, adults, everyone from the community that knew her you could just hear [Dog's name] name being screamed throughout the whole field.

Many participants shared how the Comfort Dogs form a "bridge" and "breaks down barriers" between individuals and the police officer handling the dog. They also highlighted the dog's power to change the image of policing to a more collaborative "softer image" because "...it allows students to see our local officers as approachable and friendly members of the community that they can interact with in a positive way." Handlers report that dogs serve "like an ambassador" and get them invited to go into spaces in town that they "might never have been invited before" and prompt conversations that foster relationships with the officer.

...the most useful thing has been creating relationships. It's such an easy way to build relationships with kids that might have not been comfortable talking to a police officer. And what I've seen it do long term is, I've actually been able to identify issues and get the kids help to wherever they need to go.

Finally, handlers discuss how the program fosters intra and inter-department collaboration within the county by building relationships amongst officers. This collaboration occurs between handlers in different departments and within region-wide mutual aid

consortiums. “I’m getting to meet a lot more people on various departments and different towns and communities...And it’s opened doors, you know.”

This collaboration extends beyond relationships between law enforcement to other EMS personnel, such as fire departments and dispatch centers. As one participant explains, “So it’s not just us as police, but it’s also, you know, Fire ... So I tried to ... help them cope with whatever they’re going through as well.” One handler noted the need for daily support extends to dispatchers and other support staff:

it's even just the day-to-day calls, ... a little thing here, a little thing there, and some of the dispatchers can become overwhelmed with it.: So...as soon as I walk up, all their chairs turn, and they’re all trying to play with the dog...It definitely lightens the mood in that room as well.

One area of concern was that comfort dogs could be a distraction. The survey results presented in Figure 3 reflect that 71% of participants did not share this concern. Some participants explained that when the dogs are a regular presence in their setting there is no distraction, but when the comfort dogs are not a regular part of daily programming and drop in unexpectedly, then the distraction factor surfaces.

Related to the concern regarding distraction is the concern about students who fear dogs or have dog allergies (Figure 3). Although most participants did not share this concern, it was suggested that consistent attendance of the comfort dogs in their settings would help resolve this concern as handlers would become more familiar with the constituents they are serving.

Finally, Figure 3 indicates that participants are neutral or disagree that the presence of the comfort dogs has reduced disciplinary rates, referrals to the office, or time spent there with some principals noting that many factors these rates. They also commented that the comfort dogs in their schools are not present enough at this time to impact these factors. All principals expressed interest in having comfort dogs present more consistently and pursuing interventions that may reduce such rates.

Dog Qualities, "The Secret Sauce"

"Dogs, don't you know? Don't judge you at all. Dogs are judgment free zones, and they're all full of love."

When asked what they think is going on during the interactions between the comfort dog and recipient, and why it provides benefits, participants unanimously spoke to the unique

qualities of the dog,"...it's an age, old relationship between humans and dogs...it's just it's always worked." Participants specifically pointed to the dog's ability to provide "unconditional love and acceptance" and how that carries over into other domains of an individual's life.

The individuals receive this unconditional love from [Dog's name] that leaves them feeling happy and excited. This positive response then follows them back to their home... which can also lead to people getting better night's sleep, which then starts things off on the right foot for the following day.

This unconditional love also includes the comfort dog's ability to be nonjudgmental and how this supports individuals when they can't express themselves.

it was like that feeling of like no judgment, ... cause a dog was gonna be there and love you, no matter what... they (individuals) don't have to answer why, they don't have to explain what they're feeling, because most of them probably have no idea what or why they're feeling it, but they can like release that anxiety.

Participants identified that another factor in the dynamic between a comfort dog and an individual is the dog's "innate ability to recognize when someone is anxious and ... that they could use some coddling." Specifically, Handlers repeatedly shared how the comfort dogs "know the ones that need her a little bit more" and attribute this to the dog's ability to pick up on an individual's emotional state, "they can sense it." One participant stated, "Our comfort dog is so empathetic. She understands human emotions, anxiety, sadness, anger, she is truly aware of what is going on." Whatever the mechanism at play, one result of the comfort dog's unconditional love, nonjudgmental presence, and sensory abilities is its effect on the individual seeking support. One participant pointed to a process,

When those kids are having their episodes or their outbreaks, they're not really looking for someone to give them an answer or to reply to them. The dog doesn't talk back to them. The dog doesn't try to fix it right away... I think that's helps relieve a lot of stress.... And then from there we can break down those walls so they can talk to... whoever it may be to start working on those issues.

Program Design and Administration

Participants repeatedly expressed their belief in the program and its power to build resiliency and well-being for children and the community. Likewise, participants applauded the program's scope, from working in schools, responding to crises, visiting community agencies and hospitals, attending community events, and serving EMS personnel. In doing so, participants also highlighted "lessons learned" and identified areas for growth.

Orientation to the Comfort Dog Program

Participants requested a formal orientation to the program that provided educational and promotional materials and information on how dogs can be used in various settings to support children and families. Handlers also echoed this concern, stating that the program's messaging could be improved. Specifically, informing the public about the purpose of the comfort dogs, why the program exists, what they can do, and how they are trained. Despite the handlers' extensive use of social media, they identify that "there are still people out there (that don't know), especially the districts that don't have comfort dogs."

Participants also shared that knowing what services are available and how to access them would help them orient other staff members, plan how they would use the dogs, and understand the dog's limitations. Another participant summed it up well, "that education communication piece is huge cause then people are psyched about it, and ...open to it after they learn more."

Scheduling And Service Provision

Scheduling and service provision are additional areas of improvement. For example, participants shared that they did not always know when the dog would be available, and this lack of consistency made it difficult to plan. One participant shared another drawback of inconsistency, stating that "the fact that he can't be here every week is disappointing for everybody you know?"

More Dogs and More Time With Dogs

Most participants reported wanting more dogs and more time with the dogs. Specifically, school and community agencies (e.g., libraries, hospitals, residential facilities) discussed wanting to incorporate a dog into daily and weekly operations because "everybody looks forward to it here." Others spoke about the benefit of having them "... in the building all the time" so that they can utilize them as situations arise.

The demand for more dogs and more time with the dogs may indicate the need for more dogs across the county and that handlers are busy with many competing responsibilities. For example, all of the groups we spoke to identify that handler duties limit how often they can be on site. The demands on time are especially true for the handlers who are not school resource officers. One participant shared that she reached out to a handler for a classroom visit after a student had died and explained that the handler came even though "he had just gotten off like a 14-hour shift and had slept for like 3 hours, ... he just wanted to be there for us."

The handlers themselves report being "spread thin" and acknowledge that being a comfort dog handler "could be a standalone part of the department." One handler illustrated the competing demands in this way,

It really could just be its own thing...you have other responsibilities like, I have to do this patrol job but I also have to be here for this meeting,... so many things being thrown at you all the time, ... it would just be so much easier if my only responsibility would just be to take care of [Dog's name] ...keep (him) alive, and keep the people happy by bringing (him) around.

In addition to the many duties of the handlers, the dogs are also in demand across the county, whether by the different schools within the district, servicing calls at individual family homes, or responding to major crises or events. One handler explained, "Our dogs are worked a lot in their day to day, plus the special events and keeping up with that is a lot" and as the program grows, more dogs and more time will be needed to keep up with the demand."

Administrative Support

Participants described the need for support from their administrators for the program. This broad category refers to a demonstrated commitment to the program, top-down communication of the program, program design, and funding. Demonstrating commitment from top administrators such as those in local police departments and school districts was primary as each participant group we spoke to commented on the importance of everyone being on the same page regarding the importance of and their commitment to the program.

In addition to communicating the importance of the program, participants also expressed concern about the long-term commitment to the program. Participants voiced wanting "steps taken to make sure this is not just a 'fad' and that it is an established program within police departments." Participants recognize that this support extends beyond police departments to include "long-term community buy-in."

Participants also appreciated the complicated prospect of funding such a program. They voiced their concerns about the handler role and the care for the dogs over their lifespan, stating that such a commitment is "for the long haul, 10-15 years per dog" and noted the costs associated with daily maintenance and veterinary care of the dog as well as those unexpected expenses. "That dog is gonna have issues right from time to time... before you start, make sure that people who want these programs take thought into that long-term care of the dog."

Above all, participants discussed the need for well-thought-out program design. One that encompasses the goals and services of the program, the selection of the handler/dog team, the training, and recognizes the competing demands on the handler's time. Specifically, participants worry about programs developed in haste and caution that "it needs to be a long-term commitment with the right person, the right (tools), the right resources behind it." An important aspect of program design is the comfort dog/handler team training. Participants acknowledged the extensive training involved, repeatedly stressed that teams "not be put in service before they are ready," and identified the need for a standardized training program accessed via the same source all teams utilize. Finally, participants requested fewer demands on handler time so that the comfort dog could be in service more consistently.

Along with these concerns, participants also spoke of wanting to support local police departments in educating the community about the program's importance and advocating for funding. Participants identified local groups, such as parent advocacy groups, that could play a role in campaigns to raise awareness and engage in fundraising, going so far as to suggest funding resources such as ARPA as possible avenues to pursue.

Section Four

Discussion & Recommendations

The PCDAO sought an evaluation of the Comfort Dog Program as viewed by the dog handlers and those who supervised, observed, or used the services. Our evaluation involved gathering quantitative and qualitative survey data and conducting semi-structured focus group interviews. We gathered and analyzed the data from each source separately before synthesizing the findings. The results reflect the views of 81 participants who filled out the survey and 26 who also participated in focus groups. This evaluation is unique in that we found no existing literature that examined AAI delivered by law enforcement personnel or focused on building resiliency to prevent adverse health outcomes such as substance misuse.

The PCDAO Comfort Dog Program is early in its implementation but already provides a comprehensive range of AAI services. Handlers provide services in school settings, visit hospitals, elder agencies, and community centers, and respond to crises. Participants in the study report strong support for the program and offer helpful feedback in the areas for improvement, namely in marketing and educating the public on the program, structuring their service offerings, partnering with local stakeholders to provide these services consistently, streamlining handler roles to improve availability, and standardizing their training protocols.

Participants who observed the Comfort Dogs in action overwhelmingly agree that The PCDAO Comfort Dog Program enhances resiliency and well-being. Specifically, our findings suggest that AAI build protective factors central to preventing substance misuse, including emotion regulation and coping skills, educational attainment, and relationships with adults who care (Griffin & Botvin, 2010; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Shahbazirad & Azizi, 2018). Consistent with prior research by Baird et al., 2023 and Brelsford, 2017, participants reported that engagement with the comfort dogs elevated student mood, decreased their anxiety, and helped them regulate their emotions so that they could return to class. Also, as indicated by Baird et al. (2023), Jarolmen & Patel (2018), and Reynolds and Rabschultz (2011), participants reported that interaction with the comfort dogs decreased test anxiety and increased motivation to attend school and focus on assignments. Further, we found that interaction with the comfort dogs helped students process grief associated with losses they have experienced. Helping students manage the grief associated with death is especially important as Plymouth County is a region experiencing high rates of drug overdose (MA Department of Public Health). These

results, taken as a whole, indicate that an interaction with a comfort dog provides the support and comfort an individual needs to regulate their emotions and demonstrate behavior conducive to effective functioning in the setting. This process supports the integration of coping strategies and resilience necessary to prevent substance misuse.

Participants also reported the value of the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program in building community well-being. The avenue to such well-being appears multi-faceted and parallels many aspects represented in literature. Consistent with findings by McNicholas & Collis (2000), the comfort dogs catalyzed bringing people together and fostering interaction. Further, participants explain that this interaction with the dog as a focal point builds a sense of pride in and collective ownership of their community, a result that aligns with those found by Mombeck and Albers (2024) and Weinbaum and Pruitt (2021). Thus, enhanced community well-being supports resiliency vis-à-vis the increased safety resulting from resident ownership of their environments (Donnelly et al., 2016; Leverentz et al., 2018; Sampson et al., 1997).

Another facet of community well-being is the relationships fostered by interaction with the comfort dogs. Research indicates that relationships with a caring adult reduce the likelihood of a child engaging in risky behavior such as substance misuse (Sieving et al., 2016). However, no research exists on the influence of AAI to improve relationships with law enforcement. All participant groups in our sample spoke to this occurrence. One handler said, "I always thought that the police motorcycle is our best community policing tool, but I've since changed my mind that the dog is now actually the best community policing tool ... It makes the partnership." One benefit of these improved relationships is that handlers are better equipped to understand what an individual is experiencing and to make the appropriate referrals for help. These improved relationships also extend between members of law enforcement and other EMS personnel as interaction with the comfort dog invites intra and inter-department relationship building, mutual aid, and collaboration in efforts to reduce substance misuse and overdose-related death.

The unique qualities of the dog seem to lie at the heart of interactions with the comfort dogs. Many theories and research findings exist to explain and examine these qualities, with most suggesting that the human-animal bond is a crucial ingredient (Beetz, 2017). Participants point to the human predisposition to animals and suggest that the dogs' ability to sense the needs of the individual and provide an unconditional, nonjudgmental acceptance is what lies at the heart of interactions. To make sense of this process, we can turn to the biopsychosocial model

(Bronfenbrennar, 1990; Engel, 1980; Lehman et al., 2017; Serpell, 2017), which posits that the interaction of physical, psychological, and social factors influences individual outcomes. Viewed within the Comfort Dog Program context, one application of this model is that in moments of emotion dysregulation, contact with dogs may trigger both a biological and psychological response by reducing the adrenal hormones associated with stress (e.g., cortisol), increasing stress-reducing hormones such as oxytocin, and providing a safe, supportive relationship. This allows the individual to gain more control over their emotions, employ effective coping responses, and display prosocial behavior. The comfort dog's physical presence, unconditional love, and responsiveness to the individual are central to this process.

Implications for Practice

Evaluation results demonstrate that comfort dogs support the work of law enforcement, teachers, counselors, social workers, and health care personnel. The lessons learned through this early stage of program implementation point to areas for development. Namely, structuring the program design and effective marketing throughout the county will enhance buy-in and encourage support for the program. Expanded administrative support of a streamlined handler role and a thorough orientation to program services can help delivery become more consistent across sites, thus increasing desired outcomes. Acquiring appropriate funding sources that ensure long-term support for the program and care of the dogs is a central challenge. The PCDAO actively pursues federal grant funding, but a more comprehensive range of resources may be needed. Participants voiced a desire to support advocating for the program and working with local and state agencies to expand the range of financial support.

Further program development that addresses funding, administration, and service delivery is essential because, as one handler explains, the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program "is too important to fail." Evaluation results point to the benefit of providers across disciplines (e.g. teachers, counselors, social workers) incorporating AAI delivered by the program into their services. Teachers can benefit from a comfort dog in their classroom via improved classroom climate and increased motivation and focus, which can translate into academic gains in reading skills (Brelsford et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2017). Counselors and social workers can partner with a handler-dog team in their provision of individual and group therapies targeting the effects of trauma and ACEs (Dietz et al., 2012; Jalongo & Guth, 2022; O'Haire, 2015), while regular presence of the comfort dogs in health care settings can support the healing of patients and the

efforts of medical professionals (Creagan et al., 2015; Barker et al., 2015). The AAI industry is growing, and many professional organizations exist to support integration across settings.

Future AAI research incorporating experimental design is needed to understand the effectiveness and mechanisms of these interventions. Specifically, such projects should use multiple measurement tools and incorporate designs that include baseline and outcome data. Finally, future samples should include recipients of these interventions and their parents.

Recommendations

Program Design

Identify And Articulate the Scope of Services Offered by the Program. The program offers services ranging from daily or weekly check-ins to attending community events and responding to crises. (The nature of these services varies according to location, and some handlers provide more structured, regular services than others.) We recommend formalizing some of these services and offering them consistently. For example, some services might be providing weekly support to existing social skills or therapeutic groups, providing weekly check-ins for individuals, conducting as-needed services for acute situations (e.g., dysregulated child in school, domestic violence calls), weekly visits at local hospitals/Council on Aging, attendance at specific types of community events, and responding to community crises. We recommend identifying two to four locations with a dedicated handler, collaborating with these site providers to identify one or two best practice interventions assessable with baseline and outcome data, and delivering these interventions consistently over time.

Although the AAI field has yet to formalize one set of standards, guidelines and areas of best practice within the industry exist. These practices include the selection and care of the dog, handler characteristics, training, orientation of consumers to the dog, and the services provided (Brelsford, 2020; Serpell, 2020). In addition, established professional organizations in the industry, such as the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, Hope Animal Assisted Crisis Response, National Crisis Response Canines, Pet Partners, and Therapy Dogs International, are potential resources of support. We recommend that the PCDAO Comfort Dog program engage with any of these providers to guide program development.

Finally, to build consistency in service delivery, we recommend that one person at each site serve as a scheduler who collaborates with the handler regarding the needs of the dog at the site. For example, as currently occurs at one school, an employee could serve as the coordinator

of services who school personnel (e.g., teachers and counselors) contact to schedule Comfort Dog services. The coordinator could then work with the handlers to finalize a calendar of services. Likewise, if there is a student in need of immediate assistance, that designated staff member could contact the handler for an expedited response. Doing so could assist handlers and their Chiefs in implementing the program for their community.

Orientation to the Comfort Dog Program

Create Orientation Materials and Protocols/Multi-Pronged Messaging Campaign.

All participant groups want clear messaging about the Comfort Dog program and the services provided. Although the handlers have social media pages and materials for distribution, we recommend a formalized multi-prong campaign to orient stakeholders, communities, and individual constituents to the program. Specifically, participants requested a combination of written and visual materials and in-person orientation, such as pamphlets providing the history and purpose, training of handler/dog, and services provided. In-person orientation sessions could include information sessions for local agencies, school administrators, teachers, and counselors on the services provided, followed by agency/school assemblies that educate constituents on what to expect from the comfort dogs and appropriate behavior when interacting with the dogs.

Training

Identify Standardized Training Protocols and Resources. Comfort Dog teams receive regular training from different providers, but all receive the same basic obedience and crisis response training. We agree with handlers that a standardized training program would ensure consistency for all Comfort Dog teams. Therefore, we recommend training guidelines set forth by industry leaders and covered in detail by Brelsford et al. (2017) and Serpell (2017), as well as professional associations, including the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, Hope Animal Assisted Crisis Response, National Crisis Response Canines, Pet Partners, and Therapy Dogs International. At a minimum, the program should consider following training guidelines set out by those in the Animal Assisted Crisis Response industry, as the Comfort Dogs engage in this work and currently receive some of AACR recommended training.

Administrative Support and Funding

Administrative support. Effective orientation of community members to the goals and services provided is essential to generate interest and cement the necessary support for program integration and longevity. Providing administrators with the data they need to create enthusiasm

among their funders and staff includes thorough orientation to the program, evidence of its effectiveness, and collaboration in tailoring services to their setting.

Identify Funding Streams to Provide Lifetime Care for the Dog. Appropriate funding is central to this program's success, and the PCDAO actively pursues revenue streams. There are challenges inherent in funding such a program including planning for long term daily dog care, (e.g., food, shelter, and accessories), regular vet care and pet insurance, and extending this support after the dog's retirement. We recommend continued development of local non-profit working dog foundations and relationships with corporate providers to fund daily care as well as active engagement in state legislative efforts aimed at emergency medical and retirement care for police canines (e.g., H.2423 & H.2424) to ensure this legislation extends to comfort dogs.

Streamline Handler Role and Responsibilities. In addition to long-term care for the dog, the handler's responsibilities require mindful planning. It is essential to ensure that appropriate dogs are chosen and matched with a handler who can engage in a long-term working relationship and provide lifetime dog care. In addition to the primary caregiving responsibilities, role structure is also a consideration. Handlers' multiple competing demands make it challenging to provide comfort dog services consistently and reliably. Funding handler roles that have the Comfort Dog Program as the primary duty is ideal. Considering the funding structure of local departments and workforce commitments, we appreciate the challenge of this recommendation.

Funding for Long-term Program Stability. Finally, funding for the program's long-term stability is essential. We recommend working with local, state, and federal agencies to locate funding opportunities. Also, we suggest building partnerships with community groups (e.g., parent associations and school committees) to generate local buy-in, ideas of funding sources, involvement in nonprofit working dog fundraising efforts, and support from taxpayers for municipal funding.

Conclusion

Evaluation results identify the structure and services of the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program and suggest that the program is meeting its goals. The program builds protective factors that enhance resiliency and deter the initiation of substance misuse. Specifically, interventions build relationships and support emotion regulation, coping skills, and educational attainment.

Further, the program builds community well-being by bringing people together, fostering relationships, and creating a sense of pride in one's community. Handlers report building

relationships with the young people in their communities, who then view the police more positively. The program also fosters intra and interdepartmental collaboration with a range of first responders and EMS personnel. The dogs' unique ability to sense one's needs and provide unconditional, nonjudgmental acceptance lay at the heart of how participants see this program working. Continued administrative support in funding, program design, and service delivery will ensure the expansion of consistent service delivery and lifetime care of the dogs. In doing so, the citizens of Plymouth County will benefit in the form of improved resiliency and well-being.

Section Five

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Appendix A

Research Team Biographical Information

Leslie J. Sattler, Ph.D., LICSW

Leslie J. Sattler, Ph.D., LICSW is an Associate Professor at Bridgewater State University School of Social Work, earning an MSW from Boston University and a Ph.D., in Social Work at Simmons College. Leslie has over twenty years of clinical practice experience working with juvenile justice involved youth and fourteen years teaching at BSU. Her research interests include youth violence, gene x environment interactions, pedagogical methods, and clinical interventions. She is actively involved in a variety of program assessment projects and has earned numerous awards for this work from BSU. Her current assessment project involves exploring the perceived effectiveness of the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office Comfort Dogs Program.

Robert McMackin Ed.D

Dr. McMackin is the former Chief of Psychology at Lemuel Shattuck Hospital, has been the principal investigator in several studies related to juvenile justice and program outcomes, and has provided psychological consultation to state and federal programs. Currently, he serves as a content area expert for an Accenture Federal Services Bureau of Prisons project.

Chloe Wojtowicz, MSW

Chloe Wojtowicz, MSW currently works as a research assistant on this project and recently graduated from Bridgewater State University with her MSW. Her professional background includes years of experience working in the mental health field with children, adolescents, and young adults. Her educational and professional experiences have inspired a strong interest in animal-assisted interventions and exploring the therapeutic relationship between humans and animals.

Appendix B-Logic Model



Logic Model	PROGRAM NAME	Plymouth County DA Comfort Dogs	OFFICE	Plymouth County DA
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NEEDS STATEMENT:

Children and families of Plymouth County are experiencing an opioid crisis that threatens their wellbeing. In particular, children exposed to opioid use related traumas and other adverse childhood experiences are at risk of developing social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impairment that can lead to behavioral health issues as they mature.

THEORY OF CHANGE:

Children exposed to opioid use related traumas and other adverse childhood experiences are at risk of developing social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impairment that can lead to behavioral health issues as they mature. One way to mitigate the impact of the stress from these experiences is to provide Animal-assisted interventions (AAI). AAI refers to a category of services involving the use of animals to improve human well-being (Bert, et al, 2016; Brelsford et al, 2020). AAI consist of interventions specific to crisis response, mental and physical health, and general supportive activities that range from meeting daily living needs to providing general comfort. Research suggests AAI increases reading comprehension, learning motivation and psychosocial functioning, reduces PTSD symptomatology, improves behavioral and emotional wellbeing, and reduces stress, pain, and anxiety (Bert et al., 2016; Brelsford et al., 2017; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; O’Haire et al., 2015). The Plymouth County DA’s Comfort Dog program seeks to mitigate the exposure to adverse events experienced by children by providing 20 trauma and crisis trained dogs and handlers in police departments across the county. These Comfort Dog teams support law enforcement efforts by assisting during crises and working with children in schools and in the community to enhance resilience, community response, and support.

Program Goal: To offer local law enforcement a Comfort Dog to assist with their efforts in identifying, responding, supporting, and treating those impacted by anxiety, mental illness, illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs.						
Inputs	Activities	Outputs (# of)	OUTCOMES			OBJECTIVES
			Short-term	Mid-term (Intermediate)	Long-term (Aspirational)	
• Funding • Referrals from DECI partners • Support of the DA’s office • Dogs • Handlers • Training • Equipped Cars • Insurance • Material goods	Training96hrs/yr Advertising • Social media & dog materials MOUs with schools School Based Services • Visiting classrooms • Guidance visits • Groups • Individual referral	• Comfort Dogs placed with handlers • Trainings attended • Maintenance of social media pages • Development of advertising materials • Creation of Text/email chain • Communication using text/email chain • Monthly Handler Meetings	Onboard 14 (16) Dogs Training • Initial Training • Trauma Training • Crisis Intervention Training Social Media created Advertising materials	On board 20 Dogs Ongoing training (96hrs/yr) Social Media pages created, maintained, & distributed	Comfort Dog at every department in county (29?) Standardized training Uniform social media presence Uniform advertising materials	Deliver 20 Comfort Dogs for deployment within Plymouth County, MA. • Onboard police departments into the program • Certifications for Comfort Dog Team trainings • Train Comfort Dog Teams on the Plymouth County DA’s DECI

for dogs • Social Media- instagram, facebook • <i>List serve</i> • <i>Text Chain/Call out procedures</i> • Critical incident response team • Referrals for home visits •	• Walking hallways • Office hours • Morning Drop offs • Responding to crisis in schools • Educational program • Handle with Care • Community based Services • COA • Hospitals • Nursing • Daycare • Educational program • B&GClub • Library events • Community events • Summer Camp • DARE Camp • Special Olympics • Wellness events • Law Enforcement • sInvestigation • Calls • CISM/SEMLEC response • DECI Home Visits	# School Based Service # Community Services # Law Enforcement Activities	Communication chain Increase positive contact b/n public & officers Open lines of communication to talk with officers Increase public exposure to comfort dogs	Call out procedure finalized Building positive relationships b/n public & officers Seeking out officers to talk Increase public comfort with dogs in public setting	Positive constituent perceptions of officers as supportive presence Acceptance of dogs: In public settings	program to enhance pathways to resources and service for children and families • Trauma Informed Training for comfort dog handlers • Crisis-response trainings for comfort dog handlers during incidents and incident aftermath to ensure their well-being • Advertise program • Make dogs accessible to public To enhance resilience, community response, and support to those impacted by substance use. Provide comfort and emotional support for the well-being of Drug Endangered Children and students with Adverse Childhood Experiences
			Mood Related • Des-escalation & Grounding • Regulate emotion • Decreasing anxiety • Increase mood • Decrease loneliness • Increase interaction Behavioral • Decreasing time out of classroom • Reducing acting out behaviors	Mood Related • Build coping skills • Decreasing anxiety • Reinforce relaxation techniques • Increase sense of belonging • Increased # of friends • Improve ability to process events Behavioral • Reducing times out of class • Decreasing behaviors	Mood Related • Improved Emotion Regulation • Improved resiliency • Increased support group • Sense of belonging and welcome Behavioral • Decrease behavioral acting out in schools • Increase social skills • Decrease avoidant	

			• Faster transitions • Increase counselor referrals • Increase motivation School Related • Improving focus • Improving attitude • Decreasing test anxiety • Aiding transitions • ESL student adjustment • Reducing school avoidance • Staying in school • Improve classroom behavior • Ownership of dog/sense of community with dog	associated with school <i>stressors</i> • Increase help seeking behaviors School Related • Reinforce behavior standards • Increase School Motivation • Decrease time needed to transition • Decrease School Avoidance	behaviors • Decreased risky behavior in youth • Decreased drug related crime and overdose School Related • Improving School Climate • Improving sense of community • Reinforcing equity • Improving long term adjustment to school • Reduce dropping out • Improve MCAS testing environment	
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ASSUMPTIONS
• Building protective factors of resiliency and well-being will decrease risky behavior and engagement in substance misuse • AAI such as provided by the PCDAO Comfort Dog program builds protective factors of emotion regulation and coping, relationships with law enforcement and community members and community well-being.

EXTERNAL FACTORS
• Funding structures • Local department and institutional administrative and staffing structures • Workforce responsibilities

Appendix C

Tables

Table C1*Sample Demographics n=81*

Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Male	63	78
Female	17	21
Non-Binary	1	1
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1
Black	3	4
White Non-Hispanic	77	95
Age		
25-29	10	13
30-34	9	12
35-39	14	18
40-44	11	14
45-49	4	5
50-54	15	19
Over 54	15	19
Setting Worked		
Agency serving elders	5	6
Elementary School	17	22
Middle School	12	15
High School	19	24
Hospital	3	4
Library	3	4
Police Department	10	13
School District	2	3
Vocational or Other School	8	10
Role		
Handler of Comfort Dog	11	14
Teacher	22	27
Counselor	21	26
Principal	12	15
Librarian	4	5
Administrator	9	11
Other	2	2
Years in Role		
0-4	28	35
5-9	21	26

10-14	12	15
15-19	9	11
Over 20	10	13
Own a dog	57	71
Participate in AAI	55	69

Table C2*Comfort Dog Program Services (n=11)*

	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Annual Total	Mean
Trainings Attended	29	45	28	28	24	25	31	25	26	261	29.00
Social Media Pages	32	35	31	33	33	32	34	34	34	298	33.11
Social Media Posts	112	159	129	133	124	119	143	131	97	1147	127.44
Advertising Materials	5	2	2	4	1	1	3	0	0	18	2.00
Individuals Served	11206	10281	8944	9549	9764	9548	13358	15841	12109	100600	11177.78
Classrooms Visited	154	150	162	150	149	146	158	142	135	1346	149.56
Counseling Visits	136	136	135	118	136	119	134	119	87	1120	124.44
Library Visits	11	12	14	13	12	15	13	13	13	116	12.89
Elder Agency Visits	11	20	18	19	15	19	21	14	13	150	16.67
Public Events	41	65	53	44	52	57	63	87	64	526	58.44
Drop Off Attended	85	83	86	68	67	64	76	72	51	652	72.44
Crisis Responses	20	26	12	13	12	29	24	16	15	167	18.56
Handle with Care Cases	8	20	8	14	7	7	14	6	3	87	9.67

Table C3*Level of Agreement with Training Type (n=9)*

Statement	Least Helpful (1)	Less Helpful (2)	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful (3)	Helpful (4)	Most Helpful (5)
AKC Puppy Star			1	1	4
AKC Canine Good Citizen				1	7
AKC Canine Good Citizen Advanced				1	4
Standardized Public Access Test				1	5
Crisis Intervention Training				1	6
SAMSHA Online Trauma Training			4		
Individualized Training				2	6

Appendix D

Instruments

D1. Comfort Dogs Program Survey Spring 2024

Q0 Your school, group, or organization participates in a Comfort Dog Program sponsored by the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office and your community's police department. A comfort dog is a type of animal assisted intervention that provides comfort to people who have had difficult life experiences. This program has a police department resource officer visit your school, group, or organization with a comfort dog.

You are invited to participate in a survey about the Comfort Dogs Program. The survey is being conducted by a research team from Bridgewater State University at the request of the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office for an initial evaluation of the program. If you decide to participate in this study, your participation will involve sharing your opinions on the effectiveness of the Comfort Dog Program. Survey items consist of three question styles: yes or no questions, those asking your level of agreement, and open-ended questions that allow you to provide your own perceptions. This survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Although you may not personally benefit, this study is important to society because it provides understanding of the perceived effectiveness of animal assisted interventions to support the well-being of community members. Specifically, your feedback provides valuable insights on the Comfort Dog Program that will aid in providing support for and development of this program in future. There are no foreseeable risks, and you may refuse to answer particular questions or withdraw from this study at any time. Your name will not be included on the survey and your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used.

If you agree to participate, you will have the option to refuse to answer individual questions and may change your mind and leave the study at any time without penalty.

Do you agree to participate in the survey exploring the perceived effectiveness of the Comfort Dog Program?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Your school, group, or organization participates in a Comfort Dog Program sponsored by the Plymou... != Yes

D0 What is your gender?

- ☐ Female (1)
- ☐ Male (2)
- ☐ Non-binary (3)
- ☐ Transgender (4)
- ☐ Other (5)

D1 What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native (1)
- ☐ Asian (2)
- ☐ Black (3)
- ☐ Hispanic or Latinx (4)
- ☐ Mixed Race (5)
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (6)
- ☐ White (7)

D2 What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24 (1)
- ☐ 25-29 (2)
- ☐ 30-34 (3)

- ☐ 35-39 (4)
- ☐ 40-44 (5)
- ☐ 45-50 (6)
- ☐ 50-54 (7)
- ☐ Over 54 (8)

D3 I own a dog.

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

D4 I have participated in or observed Animal Assisted Interventions in the past.

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

D5 Please identify the setting in which you currently work.

- ☐ Agency Serving Elders (1)
- ☐ Community Center (2)
- ☐ Elementary School (3)
- ☐ Middle School (4)
- ☐ High School (5)
- ☐ Hospital (6)

- ☐ Library (7)
- ☐ Police Department/Correctional Facility (8)
- ☐ School District (9)
- ☐ Vocational or Other School (10)

D6 How many years have you been in your current role?

- ☐ 0-4 (1)
- ☐ 5-9 (2)
- ☐ 10-14 (3)
- ☐ 15-19 (4)
- ☐ Over 20 (5)

Q1 My role is:

- ☐ Handler of Comfort Dog (7)
- ☐ Teacher/School Resource Officer Without Comfort Dog (8)
- ☐ Counselor (e.g., School Adjustment Counselor, Social Worker, Psychologist, Guidance, Nurse) (9)
- ☐ Principal (10)
- ☐ Librarian (public libraries) (11)
- ☐ Administration (e.g., Counsel on Aging, elder services, Superintendent, Director) (12)
- ☐ Other (e.g., Law enforcement, dispatchers, correction staff, court employees, CISM) (13)

End of Block: Intro Block

Start of Block: Handler Questions

H0 I am familiar with the Comfort Dog Program at my school/organization.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

H1 I have had students/individuals referred for contact with the Comfort Dog.

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Skip To: H5 If I have had students/individuals referred for contact with the Comfort Dog. = No

H2 Most students interacting with the Comfort Dog services are:

- ☐ Classroom Specific referrals (1)
 - ☐ Referred to me by others (2)
 - ☐ Student initiated contact in school common places (e.g., hallways, Resource Officer office, outside) (3)
-

H3 Please identify what percentage of referrals fall under the category of "Handle with Care"

- ☐ 0-25% (1)
- ☐ 26-49% (2)
- ☐ 50-74% (3)
- ☐ 75-100% (4)

H4 Interactions with Comfort Dogs for referred students are effective.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

H4a How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog Program on referred students?

H5 I have had classrooms/groups/organizations referred for contact with the Comfort Dog.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: H6 If I have had classrooms/groups/organizations referred for contact with the Comfort Dog. = No

H5a Comfort dog interactions in the classrooms/group/organization are effective.

☐ Strongly Agree (1)

☐ Agree (2)

☐ Neutral (3)

☐ Disagree (4)

☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

H5b How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog Program on the classroom/group/organization?

H5c Comfort dogs provide support to individuals participating in an investigation.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

H6 I have had individuals voluntarily seek out interaction with the Comfort Dogs:

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Block If I have had individuals voluntarily seek out interaction with the Comfort Dogs: = No

Display This Question:

If I have had individuals voluntarily seek out interaction with the Comfort Dogs: = Yes

H6a How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog on the individual seeking interactions?

End of Block: Handler Questions

Start of Block: Questions for All

Q3 The comfort dog handlers appear well trained.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q4 The comfort dog handlers reach out to various individuals.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q5 The Comfort Dog Program contributes to a positive climate in my organization.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q6 Individuals have reported to me that they appreciate the Comfort Dog Program.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q7 Comfort dogs can have a calming effect on some individuals.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q8 Having a comfort dog in the classroom or group improves the learning environment.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q9 Interaction with the comfort dog improves an individual's focus on tasks.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q10 Interaction with the comfort dog improves an individual's motivation to complete work.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q11 Dogs in the classroom/group/organization prove to be a distraction for those in the classroom/group/organization.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q12 I am worried that dogs spread contagions and should not be in the school/group/organization.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q13 How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog Program on your school, group, or organization?

Q14 If you described the impact of the comfort dog interaction for an individual, classroom, group, or organization, how do you think it works?

Q15 What are two or three benefits of the Comfort Dog Program?

Q16 What are two or three ways the Comfort Dog Program could be improved?

Q17 What are two or three of your concerns about the Comfort Dog Program?

End of Block: Questions for All

Start of Block: Final Question

Q18 Any additional comments?

End of Block: Final Question

Start of Block: Teachers/Counselors/Librarians/Admins

T0 I am familiar with the Comfort Dog Program at my school/organization:

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

T1 I have requested the Comfort Dogs visit my classroom, group, or organization.

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Skip To: T2 If I have requested the Comfort Dogs visit my classroom, group, or organization. = No

T1a How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog Program on your classroom, group, or organization?

T2 I have requested the Comfort Dog visit a specific individual(s):

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Block If I have requested the Comfort Dog visit a specific individual(s): = No

T2a Why did you make use of the Comfort Dog Program for this individual(s)?

T2b How would you describe the impact of the Comfort Dog Program on this individual(s)?

End of Block: Teachers/Counselors/Librarians/Admins

Start of Block: Principal Questions

P0 I am familiar with the Comfort Dog Program at my school/organization:

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

P1 Since the Comfort Dog Program began at my school, comfort dogs aid students in their transitions back to school after extended absences.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

P2 Since the Comfort Dog Program began in my school, disciplinary incidents have decreased.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

P3 Since the Comfort Dog Program began in my school, office referrals have decreased.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

P4 When a student is referred to the office, having a comfort dog present reduces the amount of time spent in the office.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

P5 The Comfort Dog Program is effective in engaging high risk students.

- ☐ Strongly Agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

D2. Training Survey

Please rate the following training modalities.

(1 = Not helpful, 2 = Slightly helpful, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Helpful, 5 = Very Helpful)

Source	Yes	No	Please Rate Your Answers 1- 5 (5=Most Helpful)
a) AKC Puppy Star			
b) AKC Canine Good Citizen			
c) AKC Canine Good Citizen Advanced			
d) Standardized Public Access Test			
e) Crisis Intervention Training			
f) SAMSHA Online Trauma Training?			
g) Individualized Training			

12. How much do you agree with the following statements related to training?

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a) Range of training prepares me and dog for work					
b) Training times fit my schedule					
c) Training is affordable					
d) Online training models are applicable to my work					
e) Training is a good value					
f) I have department support to attend training					
g) Training is delivered in a format that is easily understood					
h) Trainers are responsive to my dog and my needs					
i) Trainers respond to my feedback and input					
j) Training facilities are appropriate for skills to be taught					
k) Trainers are accessible outside of dedicated training time					

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
l) Training helps me understand the environments I can access based on our skill progression					
m) Written training materials supplement my training					
n) I find written materials helpful in developing skills					

D4. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What is your role and type of involvement in the Comfort Dogs Program?
2. What have you observed during the interaction between the handler/dog and individual receiving the intervention?
3. Based on what you've observed, what is the most useful?
4. Based on what you've observed, how do you think it works?
5. What are 2 or 3 areas of the program that could be improved?
6. If you were designing a comfort dog program, what would be its necessary components?