



THE COMFORT DOG PROGRAM OFFICE OF THE PLYMOUTH COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY



The mission of the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office (PCDAO) Comfort Dog 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 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 with support 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 20 dogs placed within 17 communities.

Comfort Dog Program handlers include local law enforcement personnel who, along with their comfort dogs, serve local schools and communities both day and night. In addition, as part of the regional response team, comfort dog teams provide mutual aid to communities in crisis and attend community events across Plymouth County. All handler and dog teams undergo extensive, regular training and are certified to qualify as a "comfort/community resource dog."

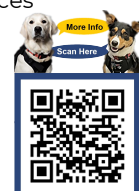
Services provided by the Comfort Dog Program consist of greeting students as they arrive at school, visiting specially contained classrooms, providing stress relief to students prior to standardized testing, comforting children experiencing a crisis, supporting students experiencing emotional dysregulation so that they can return to the classroom, and being a member of the school community through their presence in shared spaces. Comfort Dog Program teams also service community members by responding to calls at citizen residences, attending community events, and comforting victims and survivors of individual and community crises.

In an average month, comfort dogs and their handlers are present in over 30 schools, several community agencies, and numerous community events, where over 10,000 youth and others interact with these handler-dog teams. Additionally, the dogs and their handlers assisted in 19 crises each month and made direct outreach to youth identified as high risk due to drug exposure, domestic, court-related, or other stressful situations. All interventions are in collaboration with school or community personnel.

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).

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 by supporting resiliency and well-being. Central to resiliency are protective factors that play a role in substance misuse prevention. 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). Research suggests AAI enhance education attainment, strengthen psychosocial functioning, reduce PTSD symptomatology, improve behavioral and emotional well-being, and reduce stress and anxiety (Bert et al., 2016; Brelsford et al., 2017).

AAI, as provided by the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program, enhance protective socio-emotional functioning that is central to a resilient response to adverse experiences and may prevent substance misuse.





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PERCEIVED PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

The Plymouth County District Attorney's Office (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 program aims to support law enforcement within the county in their efforts to identify and support those impacted by anxiety, mental illness, illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs. Occurring during the Spring of 2024, the evaluation employed a mixed method design that involved sending surveys and conducting focus groups with handlers and adults who have observed Comfort Dog teams in action.

Evaluation Results

Resiliency & Well-Being

Interaction with the comfort dogs improves resiliency and well-being by building skills in the areas of emotion regulation and coping, managing stress, maintaining focus and motivation, and processing grief. Here are what some participants had to say:

"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."

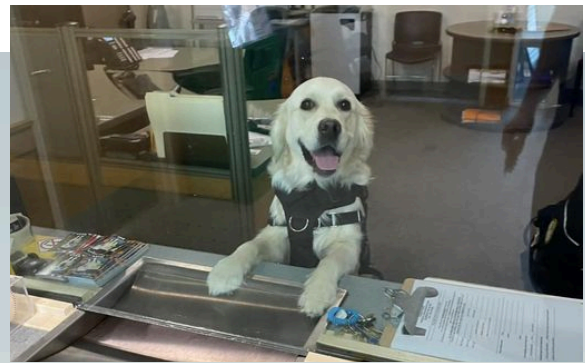
"I was in one of the classrooms that was doing [standardized testing] this morning. And I actually got a message from our principal a couple of hours later. And he just wanted to thank me from the teacher saying that you know that the stress levels were high for a lot of the kids.... She said it was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

Community Well-Being

The Comfort Dog Program also increases community well-being by fostering a positive atmosphere that brings people together, builds relationships between people, and increases a sense of community pride. Results also indicate that the PCCDP fosters intra and interdepartmental relationships and collaboration between members of law enforcement and other EMS personnel.

"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."

"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."



"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."

Dog Qualities

Lying at the heart of Comfort Dog team interactions are the unique abilities of the dogs themselves. Participants of the evaluation describe that the comfort dogs sense out those in need and provide unconditional, nonjudgmental love and support that individuals require. These interactions are described as a process wherein the dogs provide comfort to the individual, who is then able to regulate their emotions, employ coping skills, and engage in appropriate behavior.

"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, 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 ... whoever it may be to start working on those issues."

Conclusions

Evaluation results identify the structure and services of the PCDAO Comfort Dog Program and suggest that the program is meeting its goals. *Our results are consistent with previous AAI research, in that the Comfort Dog Program enhances protective factors of improving emotion regulation, coping skills, and educational attainment (1-5). Research demonstrates that these factors strengthen the resiliency needed to deter the initiation of substance misuse (6-8).* Further, our results find that the program builds protective factors of community well-being by bringing people together, fostering relationships, and creating a sense of pride in one's community. *Research indicates that enhanced community well-being supports resiliency vis-à-vis the increased safety resulting from resident ownership of their environments (9-11).* Finally, our results indicate that the program builds positive relationships with law enforcement. *Research suggests that relationships with caring adults reduce the likelihood of a child engaging in risky behavior such as substance misuse (12).*





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Services We Provide:

School Based Services

- Visiting classrooms
- Supporting specific classroom activities
- Congregating in common areas
- Working with individual students
- Comforting a dysregulated individual Responding to crises
- Participating in school assemblies
- Being present at drop-offs and pick ups

Community Services

- Attending special events (e.g., celebrations, town meetings, fairs, fundraisers, markets)
- Running specific programming (e.g., dog training exhibitions)
- Drop-in at ongoing events (e.g., sporting or club meetings)
- Crisis response
- Responding to resident calls

Community Agency/Library

- Drop-in visits
- Attending agency specific programs
- Visiting individuals
- Comforting dysregulated clients
- Sponsoring special programs
- Responding to crises

This project was supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-21-GG-04532-COAP awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



Recommendations

- Identify and Articulate the Scope of Services Offered by the Program
- Create Orientation Materials and a Multi-Pronged Messaging Campaign
- Identify Standardized Training Protocols and Resources
- Administrative Support & Financing for program longevity and lifetime care of the dog



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