

Spotlight: Paws With a Purpose

Timothy J. Cruz, Plymouth County District Attorney, Massachusetts



In 2021, a simple question from a school resource officer in Hingham, Massachusetts, sparked a movement no one could have predicted. The Hingham Police Department reached out to the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office with an unusual request: assistance in securing a comfort dog for their schools' benefit.

Hingham School Resource Officer Tom Ford first proposed bringing a comfort dog to their police department. After securing the \$5,000 mini-grant, Officer Ford adopted Opry, and the Plymouth County Comfort Dogs Program (PCCDP) was born.

The PCCDP's Origins

Opry's calm temperament and natural ability to connect with students made her a beloved presence in schools, helping anxious students, building trust, and even drawing crowds with her skateboarding skills. She is often credited with transforming how students view their school resource officer. "[Opry] has become a bridge, fostering connections with students who would have otherwise never engaged with a police officer, and her presence continues to create meaningful interactions that support both learning and well-being," said Officer Ford. Hingham Police Chief David Jones added, "It has really given us a new tool to work with that is still paying dividends every day to our department and community."



Several other communities took notice of Hingham’s success. In Hanson, Massachusetts, retired Chief Michael Miksch and School Resource Officer Derek Harrington also secured a mini-grant from the Plymouth County District Attorney to adopt Lucy, a golden retriever—and the second Plymouth Comfort Dog. Lucy quickly made an impact, helping a student with significant school-avoidance begin attending regularly just to see her.

Stories like these made clear just how impactful the program can be.

Understanding the Need

While people across the world faced unprecedented challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young adults were some of the most affected. Their schooling, social activities, and milestones were all upended, leaving kids isolated from one another and increasingly dependent on social media to find connection. As days of uncertainty stretched into months, this new and unpredictable world left students feeling increased levels of anxiety and loneliness, while also diminishing their ability to connect with one another. Although the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the development of children and young adults are still being studied, there is no question that mental health struggles increased substantially as a result of these monumental shifts.

In response to these challenges, comfort dogs have emerged as a powerful source of stability and emotional support. They are known to reduce anxiety levels, improve focus, and help students cope with difficult and traumatic experiences—needs that have grown more urgent in the pandemic’s aftermath. Within the PCCDP, the presence of these dogs has done more than support individual well-being; it has also helped strengthen relationships between youth and police. At a time when trust and connection are increasingly important goals for many communities, the program’s impact has been both timely and meaningful.

Structure and Growth

Beyond offering comfort and connection, these initiatives rely on thoughtful implementation and administration support to ensure the dogs can safely and effectively serve students. The PCCDP is implemented by the local police school resource officer or community outreach officer, who also serves as the dog's handler and caretaker. This dual role allows officers to build consistent, positive relationships with students while ensuring the dog's well-being and readiness for school environments. To be a member of the program, both dog and handler must complete the required training and certification to qualify as a comfort/community resource dog team.

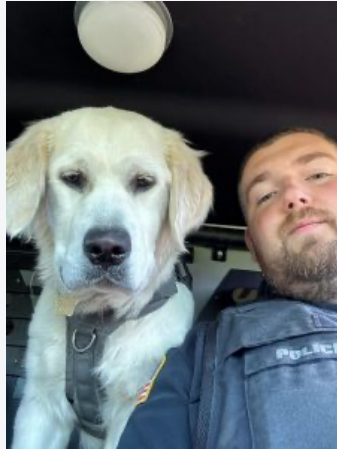
The PCCDP is solely funded through the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance's Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program grant, as well as through drug diversion moneys from the Massachusetts District Attorneys Association. Recognizing the need for a coordinated, sustainable approach, the district attorney partnered with Plymouth County police chiefs to seek out funding that would support the program's long-term growth. Through this collaboration, the PCCDP was able to build a regional network of trained teams capable not only of responding in times of crisis but of providing mutual aid to surrounding communities. Now, in an average month, comfort dogs and handlers work in more than 30 schools—reaching more than 10,000 youth. They also visit senior centers and take part in numerous community events.

As the PCCDP expanded, the district attorney's office partnered with Dr. Leslie Sattler and the Bridgewater State University School of Social Work to evaluate the program's effectiveness. Along with anecdotal evidence of the program's success, Dr. Sattler provides the district attorney's office with continued data through surveys on the comfort dogs' effectiveness in schools. In 2025, Dr. Sattler surveyed 892 students and shared the following findings:

- 94 percent reported feeling safe with their school resource officer
- 83 percent reported that the officer-comfort dog team helped them feel calm when stressed
- 85 percent reported that the officer-comfort dog team made them feel safer in school overall.

Outcomes suggest that the PCCDP's involvement in schools helps students build important protective factors that can serve to mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences and trauma. "The results suggest that the PCCDP provides an alternative approach to utilizing [school resource officers] in schools," Dr. Sattler said. "One that has the potential to shift the [officer's] traditional role of enforcement to that geared toward prevention through the development of protective factors."

Future Plans



Across Plymouth County, comfort dogs have become catalysts for connection. Residents feel the program is effective because the comfort dogs have the unique ability to sense one's needs and respond with unconditional, nonjudgmental acceptance. The program's comfort dogs and police handlers within the schools and at community events bring together a diverse group, building relationships, fostering community well-being, and increasing a sense of community pride.

Today, the pioneering program includes 24 comfort dogs that are paired with handlers at local police agencies across 19 communities. PCCDP teams support individuals experiencing anxiety, mental health challenges, and other substance-related disorders. Over the next two years, the district attorney's office hopes to expand Dr. Sattler's evaluation across 10 additional school districts within Plymouth County.

Officer Harrington said, "Our dogs have made a world of difference to people, young and old, and helped get them through times of crisis. I cannot wait to see what the future holds for our program."

RECOMMENDATIONS

For agencies exploring innovative approaches to community engagement, the Plymouth County Board of Supervisors offers three guiding practices:

Does your agency have an initiative or project you'd like to see featured? Email us at editor@theiacp.org.

- Build strong partnerships with schools and community stakeholders.
- Invest in high-quality training and certification for dog and handler teams.
- Collect and evaluate data to demonstrate impact and guide program growth.

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