



Promising Practices

Courthouse Dog Programs Help Traumatized Victims Participate in the Judicial Process

Children who have been victimized or have witnessed crime may find interactions with the justice system to be [nearly as traumatic](#) as the initial incident. Interactions including, forensic medical exams, law enforcement or legal counsel interviews and courtroom testimony can cause anxiety or stress. In most jurisdictions, child psychologists or specially trained children advocates are employed to help minimize the fear or trauma that children may experience in these situations. However, an increasing number of jurisdictions are employing “courthouse dogs” to provide children with a comforting companion during justice-related proceedings.

Employing supportive canines has been found to reduce the stress and anxiety of children by providing unconditional love and support. These highly trained dogs sit or lay next to the victims and witnesses providing emotional support while their handlers are on-hand to oversee all of the interaction.

Courthouse dog programs began in the 1990s and are now in use in at least [three dozen states](#), working throughout the country in prosecutor’s offices, child advocacy centers, and family courts. With this growth has come standardization of programs, [published best practices](#) and annual conferences held by the [Courthouse Dogs Foundation](#).

In Oklahoma, for example, Tulsa County District Attorney [Steve Kunzweiler](#) has championed the use of courthouse dogs in cases where children who have been abused, neglected or have witnessed a crime and must participate in the legal process. In 2014, Kunzweiler championed [a state law](#) guaranteeing the right of children under 13 to have a therapy dog in court.

While data on these programs is anecdotal and qualitative, the [stories of their impact](#) are both remarkable and heartwarming.

Courthouse dog programs are often supported through state or local funding or Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants, and many of the dog trainers and handlers are volunteers. However, Courthouse Dog programs could also be funded using Byrne Justice Assistance Grants (Byrne JAG) dollars fitting within the grant’s “prosecution and courts” or “crime victim and witness” [purpose areas](#).

Some other examples of courthouse dog programs include:

[Washington](#), [Nebraska](#), [Florida](#) and [Anne Arundel County, Maryland](#).

Do you have a Promising Practice from your jurisdiction you want to share?

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