



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

News for Immediate Release

July 27, 2015

Comfort Dogs Have Dramatic Impact in Dependency Court

New video highlights benefits of placing dogs in the courts

HARRISBURG — Approximately one-third of Pennsylvania’s 60 judicial districts report that they either use comfort dogs in dependency court or are implementing a program to use them. The impact can be dramatic on the children they serve, according to judges and other judiciary personnel interviewed for a new educational video on comfort dogs. The video is produced by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), a unit of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC).

Comfort dogs come in all shapes and sizes with distinct and different personalities. But one thing they share is the ability to serve a priceless role during difficult dependency court cases by comforting children who appear in court.

“Instead of focusing on the trauma they have experienced, the memory many children have about court is spending time with the dog,” said Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer. “The use of comfort dogs can help bring about a major change in how we meet the emotional needs of all involved in the child dependency system.”

Dependency proceedings involve children who have been abused or neglected, and determinations of parental rights and custody. Court proceedings can be extremely emotional and stressful for the parties involved. It is important for children to be present in court, and it is especially important for the judge to obtain as much information as possible from the children.

The calming presence of the dogs creates a more humane and efficient system that enables child welfare and court professionals to accomplish their work in a more positive and constructive manner.

Well-documented research shows that petting an animal lowers the levels of cortisol, a stress-inducing hormone. Lowering the stress levels of court participants increases the likelihood of more complete and accurate information being provided because everyone involved can focus on the issue at hand, rather than the stress of simply being in court.

“Having the very best information possible is critical as life-altering decisions are made in these courtrooms,” said Sandra Moore, the OCFC’s administrator.

Due to a rise in the use of comfort dogs and supporting research, the AOPC and OCFC developed a [new, educational video](#), “Comfort Dogs in the Courts,” designed for judges, county officials and other court professionals. The video highlights:

- how comfort dogs are playing a significant role in dependency court
- steps counties can take to establish a customized program that works for them
- comfort dogs and their handlers
- non-profit organizations that coordinate the volunteer comfort dog programs
- judges who share their experiences with comfort dogs in the courts (President Judge Oliver Lobaugh from Venango County, Judge Robert Mellon from Bucks County, Judge Mary Ann Ullman from Berks County and Judge Ann Marie Wheatcraft from Chester County).

According to Moore, “Counties are able to create comfort dog programs that truly fit their needs. There isn’t one set formula which allows for creativity at the local level. Some counties pay for the dogs, and others work through partnerships that cost nothing, while some use the dogs in just dependency court and others use them in dependency, custody and criminal courts.

“I think courts are finding that the benefits far outweigh any concerns. The human and animal bond is strong and can have significant outcomes towards reducing trauma,” said Moore.

Justice Baer added, “Having a dog in the courthouse can make all the difference – it’s just amazing to see the smile on the children’s faces and how much less stress they have after playing with the dogs.”

People often confuse “comfort dogs” with “service dogs,” but they perform two distinct functions. Comfort dogs (also called therapy dogs) are specially trained to offer comfort, companionship and affection to those in need of a friendly presence. Service dogs (also called companion dogs) play an important, defined role in the life of a human partner with a disability by providing that person with more independence and self-sufficiency.

To qualify as a comfort dog team, the dog and the handler undergo training, and the “team” is certified in programs offered through national organizations. Although the tests to become certified are quite involved, generally dogs must be a minimum of 1-year old, have a sound temperament (quiet, non-distracting, patient and emotionally available) and be able to obey obedience commands.

[Watch the video online](#) or obtain copies by contacting the Office of Children and Families in the Courts at 717-231-3300 ext. 4255 or elke.moyer@pacourts.us.

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Editor’s Note:

A [five-minute preview version](#) of the video is also available.

Since 2006, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, along with the Department of Human Services and other partners, has reduced the number of dependent and delinquent children in temporary foster care homes by more than 7,000, or 33 percent. Placing these children into a permanent family setting greatly improves their chances to succeed and significantly reduces the cost of institutional care, saving an estimated \$117 million annually.

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