



Philosophy and Best Practices in the Use of Courthouse Dogs

What are Courthouse Dogs?

We use the term “courthouse dogs” for two reasons.

1. The courthouse is the epicenter of the criminal justice system. Although the dogs may assist people outside the courtroom, their work is done with the expectation that the case will be concluded in the courthouse.
2. Canines are not just “man’s best friend,” but have served mankind in institutional settings for centuries. The courthouse dogs of the 21st Century find a ready analog in the 19th Century firehouse dogs—the Dalmatians who were trained to run in front of a horse-drawn fire apparatus to clear a path and quickly guide the horses and firefighters to the scene. The Dalmatians also served as rescue dogs to locate victims in burning buildings.

We are confident that in this century the public will associate courthouse dogs with an equally vital role of improving the criminal justice system. Not only are they already helping prosecutors get to the truth more quickly, but they also assist crime victims by providing emotional support during the numerous points in the criminal justice process where they must relate, and relive, traumatic experiences. Finally, courthouse dogs can also provide rehabilitative services for defendants in the criminal justice system.

The Critical Need for Best Practices

A best practices model is critical to achieving national acceptance of courthouse dogs in the criminal justice system. The model is important for three reasons: (1) convincing judges that canines have a place in their courtrooms; (2) positively contributing to the administration of justice by performing as advertised; and (3) minimizing the risks of civil liability to courthouse dog handlers and sponsors should disruptions or injuries occur as a result of their presence.

The single most important factor is the proper training and vetting of canines that are certified to serve in this capacity. Improperly trained and undisciplined canines could easily disrupt courtroom proceedings, and might even create civil liability situations for their handlers and sponsors. If such an event were to occur that may make it difficult for other jurisdictions to convince a judge, court administrator, prosecutor’s office or child advocacy center to support the creation of a courthouse dog program.

Facility Dogs are usually raised and trained by organizations that are members of Assistance Dogs International, such as Canine Companions for Independence. These dogs have typically spent a year or so being raised by a volunteer puppy raiser with weekly obedience classes, had six months or more of work with a professional dog trainer at a permanent facility, and are acquired at approximately two years of age as a completely trained dog.

In order to protect the jurisdiction and handler of the courthouse dog in the case of bodily harm or property damage caused by a courthouse dog, we recommend that each dog carry a minimum of one million dollars in liability insurance. Many qualified dogs carry such policies as a part of the certification process, such as the Facility Dogs provided by Canine Companions for Independence.