



Using a Courthouse Dog in Drug Court

The Benefits of Having A Drug Court Dog

Most Drug Court participants struggle in their long recovery from drug and alcohol abuse. Multiple relapses are common. Many of the adults also have mental health issues, are homeless and unemployed. Teenagers often come from dysfunctional families and come to regard the Drug Court team as surrogate parents.

It is common for it to take almost two years to recover and graduate from a Drug Court program.

Family members, including children, often accompany Drug Court participants to the hearings and have to wait an extended period of time before the participant is excused from court. People become cranky, impatient and children cry or whine.

It is obvious that many participants are in acute emotional pain while they describe their lack of progress to the judge.

Although it is easy to applaud the success of participants, listening to their struggles can be emotionally draining for the Drug Court team.

Feelings of burn-out by drug court team members are common.

This is why a tail-wagging, loving dog can provide much needed emotional support to **everyone** in this setting. After a while your drug court dog will be regarded as a member of the “family” and provide a sense of normalcy to this environment. Participants who are struggling actually look forward to coming to court, knowing that although the judge may be displeased, at least the dog will provide some unconditional love.

What type of Drug Court dog best suits your needs?

A visiting dog team would work well in a Drug Court program because it is difficult for Drug Court staff to do their work as well as facilitate interaction between the dog and drug court participants. It is also a program that could be fairly quickly instituted. However, visiting dog teams often only work for a few hours a day and would not be able to provide comfort to everyone during an entire drug court calendar or make daily trips to court.

A facility dog has the benefit of becoming a team member and can provide a sense of continuity and predictability, which is something that is extremely important to people in recovery. The challenge is placing the dog with a primary handler who has the time to encourage the interaction between drug court participants while also doing his or her job. A drug court manager or treatment provider who is there for the entire calendar may be logical choices for this position.

Special Drug Court Dog Considerations

Many people have a fear or dislike of dogs based on either traumatic experiences or cultural beliefs. When entering Drug Court for the first time some participants are taken aback when they first see the dog. Other participants may think that the dog is there to sniff them for the presence of narcotics.

It will be important for the judge to regularly explain to newcomers why the dog is there.

Facility dogs are usually very low energy dogs and over time most people overcome their fear or dislike of the dog.

The team will need to accommodate people whose cultural beliefs prohibit contact with a dog.

Read **Chelsea and Jeeter** for a greater appreciation for what a Drug Court dog can do to benefit your program.