



## Using a Courthouse Dog in a Forensic Interview

The presence of a facility dog during a forensic interview can be a source of comfort to children and may allow them to more easily describe any abuse that they may have experienced or crime they have witnessed. A good forensic interview can greatly increase the strength of a case and may result in a guilty plea.

### The Initial Greeting

Most parents or guardians of a child victim or witness are very anxious about the prospect of their child undergoing a forensic interview. They may think that the child will be interrogated by the police and the child will feel very distressed by the experience. When greeting the family, the child interviewer should tell them that a highly-trained facility dog is available for the child and determine if the dog would be a welcomed companion during the interview. When parents are calm, kids follow suit. Many children are pleasantly surprised when they hear that a dog can be present during their interview. They become more focused on meeting the dog rather than on the apprehension that they may feel about the interview process. In addition, most parents are impressed with this extra measure taken to comfort the child. Both the child and the parents should be consulted about whether the dog will be present during the interview.

### Before the Interview

Introduce the dog to the child and take this opportunity to build rapport. Explain why the dog is there and take a few minutes to allow the child and dog interact with one another. Show the child some of the "tricks" the dog can do and teach the child how to give the dog these commands. Most facility dogs are able to comply with commands even though they are given by small children. This process empowers the child and most children feel excited to have the dog present during the interview.

### During the Interview

You can give the child a sense of control by asking the child where he or she would like the dog to sit or lie down during the interview. By choosing where the dog will be during the interview the children are also be able to control how much contact they would like with the dog. Keep the dog on a leash during the interview because many children hang on to the leash as a form of control. We have found that the dog is more effective at calming the child if there is some physical contact between them.

Use the dog to refocus the child should the child become distracted. If the child is speaking quietly ask him or her to speak up so that the dog can hear more easily.

Should the child become upset, ask the child if they would like to give the dog a hug. By doing so, the dog can provide comfort to the child when the interviewer cannot.

### After the Interview

The dog may be available to keep the child company after the conclusion of the interview. We have found that most children and their families leave the office thinking and talking about the dog instead of the reason for the interview. Children often ask to return for another visit.

### Older Children and Teenagers

Ask these witnesses if they would like to have the dog present in the room during the interview. Although they may seem reserved about having the dog with them, teenagers often resort to petting the dog when the conversation becomes more stressful. It has been noted that teenage boys often position the dog on their laps or between themselves and the interviewer as a way to create a barrier and feel more secure.