



Starting a Courthouse Facility Dog Program

Commitment and Rewards

A Facility Dog should be regarded as a member of your office staff and will be expected to work in the office for several years. A Facility Dog will be able to interact with people in courthouse public areas, child advocacy centers, and drug courts; play with office staff; participate in forensic interviews; calm victims and witnesses; and accompany witnesses to the stand in a courtroom.

Handler

A Facility Dog will require a primary caretaker/handler who is employed by your office. The dog will live with this person and this person will be primarily responsible for the dog's care. The dog will consider this person to be his or her owner. This person is usually a victim advocate or a forensic interviewer because the dog will be assisting this person most of the time. In addition to the primary caretaker there should be one or two other people who are trained to work with and care for the dog when the primary caretaker is unavailable.

Public Relations

A Facility Dog will be an office ambassador and whenever possible you should make the time to allow members of the public, and all courthouse participants, to spend some time with this dog. These dog handlers should be very outgoing and patient because a Facility Dog attracts a great deal of attention. People will want to interact with the dog and chat about their own dogs. Although this can be time consuming, it is time well spent because this type of interaction relieves stress and makes people feel happy. This is the dog's purpose in working in a courthouse setting.

Planning

The primary caregiver should draft a plan that describes the dog's duties and care. This plan should first be submitted to the prosecutor or agency director for approval. If the prosecutor or director is receptive to this idea, the plan and the benefits of a Facility Dog should be shared with office staff. It is important to have as many people as possible invested in the success of the facility dog. Accommodations should be made for people with allergies or a dislike or fear of dogs.