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Working Together: Puppies and Police Facility Dog Symposium

One point of pride throughout our nearly thirty-year history is how Puppies Behind Bars has been able to regularly identify issues concerning communities and evolve accordingly to serve new constituents. In recent years, the challenges facing our communities have been greater than ever, with both mental health crises and tensions between the public and law enforcement on the rise. Research repeatedly demonstrates that being in the company of dogs reduces stress, anxiety and depression, gets people more willing to seek help—and motivates people to engage.

Since 2019 we have been donating facility dogs to police departments in order to support employee well-being and to improve community relations. In March 2024, in response to this growing need, Puppies Behind Bars, along with the New York City Police Department (NYPD), co-hosted "Working Together: Puppies and Police," an all-day symposium to inform police, fire, university, and public safety departments about the benefits of adding facility dogs to their ranks.

The program featured a variety of speakers—from chiefs of police to campus safety officers to school resource officers; from those focusing on officer wellness to those on patrol—giving first-hand accounts of their experiences, and affirming that our pups have positively impacted their departments and communities. They also shared the challenges they have faced and offered tips on how to overcome obstacles.

The learning was not limited to prospective clients. Current clients, along with their canine partners, joined us the previous day for a professional development retreat, which included training refreshers and a chance to reunite with, and gain knowledge from, their fellow handlers working in the field.

More than fifty departments across the tri-state area were represented over the two days. But the true stars of the show, of course, were our contingent of dogs who are out there doing the work to help so many communities in so many ways.

> "It was inspiring to hear the officers speak so passionately about the impact your program has had on them, their fellow officers, and their communities."
> —Marlene Biener, General Counsel, Association of Prosecuting Attorneys

The symposium was made possible by a generous grant from Frog Crossing Foundation, Inc., North Caldwell, New Jersey.

Photo by Ashley Gilbertson and Ava Pellor for ©Puppies Behind Bars

Heroes Come in All Shapes and Sizes

Each year, Harvard University hosts the Harvard Heroes Recognition Program to celebrate the accomplishments of university staff whose work supports the mission of Harvard at the highest levels of contribution, impact, and excellence.

These staff members have been nominated and selected by their peers and departments for their leadership, teamwork, adaptability, innovation, and exceptional contributions.

When this year's ceremony was held on June 13, there was a most unusual recipient among the esteemed group. Sasha, one of our facility dogs who serves as a community engagement dog in the Harvard University Police Department with her human partner Officer Steve Fumicello, was named a Harvard Hero.

Being a Harvard Hero is an honor of high distinction—only about sixty Heroes, or half of one percent of eligible staff, are named annually. Sasha is the first non-human to ever receive the award, making it even more exceptional.

"We recognize what an unusual tribute this is," her handler Officer Fumicello stated. "I often say that Sasha started out as being the 'police dog' but has become more of a 'university dog.' Receiving an honor like this shows that the community agrees," he continued. "When people first meet Sasha, the most common question I get is: 'What is this dog looking for?' My response is always the same: 'She is just looking for smiles.'"

It sounds as if Sasha's contributions to Harvard are very human, indeed.

Photos by Officer Steve Fumicello (top), Nicholas Brown (bottom)

Leading by the Nose

Crucial to the success of our program is the training, and that doesn't stop with our puppies. Our instructors are also on a continued course of learning in order to stay on top of best practices that can be applied within the organization, to the raisers, and among our clients.

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Senior Instructor and explosive-detection canine trainer Carl Rothe attended the first annual Smart Dog Conference held last year in Arizona. Experts from across the country working in a variety of canine-focused disciplines led both lecture-style and tactical sessions, with topics ranging from Nose Work Training Plans to Reward Techniques, from Enhance Odor Motivation to Canine Fitness.

Participation allowed Carl to bring a plethora of information back to his fellow instructors and into his own teaching in the facilities where he works, assuring that PBB stays at the forefront of dog-training techniques and style.

Photos by PBB (top), Elias Weiss Friedman/ The Dogist (bottom)

Breaking Down Boundaries, One Paw at a Time

In June 2022 Puppies Behind Bars opened its program in Green Haven Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison for men, located in Stormville, New York. After seven months of pre-training, its first class of 20 puppy-raisers greeted five new puppies in January 2023, and so began their journey.

For men who are serving long sentences—in some cases, life—the program has had a great impact. They have learned to collaborate, cooperate, communicate, and grow. It is not all "fur and games," however. In addition to weekly class and hands-on evaluations, they are accountable for puppy grooming and health protocols, reading assignments, essay writing, and tests.

On July 29, 2024, following two years of toil and tears, jubilation and joy, the class participated in its first-ever graduation, hosted by the facility. Leading up to this culminating event, the men spent two weeks in Team Training, intensively guiding clients through the many commands the dogs had been taught in their care. They watched with pride—and visible emotion that many had not experienced in years—the official pairing of their pups with the veterans and police officers who will be their partners for the rest of their working years, doing the service for which the dogs were so lovingly and patiently trained and prepared.

Puppies Behind Bars celebrates the success of these first-time puppy-raisers, and the steps taken toward accepting responsibility for something other than themselves, as they begin to give back in ways they may never have before.

We must also take a moment to give thanks to all our volunteers, who generously donated their time to socializing the graduating pups, to help get them to this point.

Keep an eye out for the second installation of the Green Haven photo essay booklet, documented by acclaimed photographer Ashley Gilbertson, which will include images of the newly graduated handler and dog duos. The booklets will arrive in mailboxes November 2024.

Photos by Ashley Gilbertson and Ava Pellor for ©Puppies Behind Bars

The Therapist Has a Wet Nose

In December 2023, a pilot program was launched in Fishkill Correctional Facility to test how Canine Assisted Therapy affects patient treatment in an institutional setting. Four of our puppy-raisers were selected to assist in the program. One writes of his experience:

You know the feeling. Seeing a friendly dog, you find yourself smiling, feel yourself calming, perhaps becoming your bubbly best. Seemingly, no emotional lift is too heavy for man's best friend. That's why I note how the most effective therapists, in my experience, have a cold, wet nose.

Here in Fishkill Correctional Facility, the Office of Mental Health (OMH) operates a residential Crisis Treatment Program (CTP) for incarcerated individuals in their most unstable state, often after a suicide attempt. When Canine Assisted Therapy was proposed as a pilot program in puppy class, we all knew it was a worthwhile idea. Hands went up to volunteer. Because of my time with Puppies, and experience bringing dogs to mental health groups as a volunteer, I was chosen in addition to three others.

This pilot program is a joint venture between Puppies Behind Bars (PBB), the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), and OMH. The OMH sections are clean, quiet, and climate controlled. It was apparent that PBB put thought into how the program can best succeed, and how to ensure positive socialization for our pups.

As it was explained to us, participating dogs should be older than eight months and would be limited to two fifteen-minute sessions per day. Any patient chosen to participate would be screened. Just like in dog training, they're collecting data to see if the presence of a dog will have positive outcomes in the patient's treatment and overall mental health.

That's where we raisers come in. Clinicians and administrators have been great about asking for our input in designing the dog interaction, acknowledging our expertise. Also, they check to make sure we're not ourselves triggered by something we hear during the session (something that fortunately has not happened).

Now, several months in, all agree the pilot program is an undeniable success. I'm not violating my confidentiality agreement by telling you that the first time I walked into that conference room, as soon as the patient saw Annie, his posture, expression, and demeanor changed. He began smiling when I introduced her. I felt invisible after that as he petted Annie's shiny black coat and bent his head down for a bump of the nose.

The hiccups we've experienced have been minor and stem from OMH not always being able to notify us in advance when there won't be a patient that day. And if the session is cancelled, it means there's no patient who needs to be seen—a good problem to have.

Everyone involved sees how Canine Assisted Therapy in an institutional setting is both beneficial (for staff as well) and scalable—a program that can expand to other prisons and do tremendous good. For now, it feels like the scientific literature is just catching up to what PBB has known since 1997.

Photo by Paul Godwin

Homeward Bound

Confidence is the most important trait for a working dog to have. While confidence cannot, in and of itself, be bred, it can be nurtured. Puppies Behind Bars (PBB) newborns are whelped in a home environment, so they get early exposure to dozens of sounds, sights, and smells. Additionally, we depend on our dedicated group of volunteers who come to our "puppy house" in upstate New York to enhance puppy socialization via one-on-one attention, and help with crate training and body handling. They shower our pups with kisses and affection so that from a very early age our puppies learn that humans are good, humans are kind, and humans will take care of them.

This past spring, PBB launched a new initiative to further support the early socialization stages of our six- to eight-week-old puppies, by asking volunteers to welcome them into their homes for a minimum stay of two nights and three days.

We were fortunate to have five families step up right away!

Volunteers in this capacity work with the puppies on daily body massage, crate training, walking up and down carpeted stairs, car rides, leash walking, and generally getting them accustomed to the sights and sounds of their various environments. Once trained by PBB staff on how to safely handle and socialize the puppies in their homes, the volunteers receive the necessary equipment, as well as a manual for reference.

> Confidence is the most important trait for a working dog to have.

Similar to when volunteers take puppies for a day or overnight outing, we ask the home socializers to provide us with feedback so we know how the puppies did and how we can improve the program for both the volunteers and the puppies.

We are excited about this new venture and appreciate very much any willingness to help our puppies become as confident as possible—which translates to helping our puppies succeed.

Photos by PBB

Paws for Applause

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Puppies Behind Bars gives an all-paws salute and congratulations to Daniel F. Martuscello III on his confirmation as the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) by the New York State Senate in May 2024.

Since becoming Acting Commissioner in 2023, Dan Martuscello has continued the incredibly productive relationship between DOCCS and Puppies Behind Bars that began 27 years ago. His leadership has allowed the incarcerated individuals in seven prisons in New York State who participate in Puppies Behind Bars a chance to contribute to society, even while they are incarcerated. Forward thinking and passionate about incarcerated individuals using their time productively, Commissioner Martuscello believes strongly in rehabilitation and education. Puppies Behind Bars is lucky to have such a strong leader at DOCCS and looks forward to continuing our partnership for many, many years to come.

WELCOME WAGON

Puppies is growing! In January 2024 we added two staff members.

Jennifer Lynn White brings her decades of experience with whelping and care of young puppies to our early socialization program. Her natural ease is evident and felt by all the pups, helping build their confidence and setting them on a path to success as working dogs.

Hilary Berryman is our newest instructor, teaching part time in the Fishkill facility, as well as socializing pups during the week. She has spent many years working as a canine behaviorist, successfully managing the relationship between humans and animals and is already bringing her positive energy and understanding of this special connection to Puppies Behind Bars.

OUR GROWTH IS NOT LIMITED TO STAFF

We are happy to report that Puppies Behind Bars has expanded to Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York, currently our seventh host facility. After presenting, by invitation, in December 2023 to a vetted general population of incarcerated individuals, we conducted interviews of those who expressed further interest and 21 men were selected to begin the process of becoming puppy-raisers. As the prison administration works on setting up the essential infrastructure—assigning a dedicated unit for housing, designating a classroom for instruction, and adding a yard for puppy recreation and exercise—instructors Carl Rothe, Nora Moran, and Gilbert Molina are holding weekly classes and bringing dogs from other facilities to give the men the tools they need to get started. The first group of puppies is expected to enter later this year.

KEEPING YOU IN THE NOSE...

In our last newsletter, we featured the introduction of our program in Eastern Correctional Facility for the training of explosive-detection canines. We are proud to report that these special pups are already well on their way to doing great things to keep us, and our country, safe. The first graduate of the class, Celeste, has already been receiving accolades for doing important law enforcement work—alerting her handler to ignitable liquid scents and helping identify suspects in ongoing investigations. Plus, six others from that first class—Calvin, Maggie, Murphy, Oakley, Tara, and Zeus—have finalized an additional canine academy training program with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Those who successfully graduate the training program go on to patrol some of the nation's high-profile events like the Super Bowl, the presidential inauguration, and political conventions. Kudos to their first-time puppy-raisers, instructor Carl Rothe, and all the volunteers who helped these dogs on their path to success.

Photos by Paul Godwin (left), Elias Weiss Friedman/ The Dogist (right)

In Memory, In Gratitude

Barbara Gladstone, one of Puppies' biggest cheerleaders, died on June 16, 2024.

Barbara was introduced to us by artist and friend of PBB Jim Hodges when she adopted one of our dogs, Albee. From then on, she embraced our mission wholeheartedly. Not only did she cherish her dogs (after Albee, she adopted Noonan), she understood fully the impact the love and companionship of a dog has on one's life. She knew what Albee and Noonan meant to her, and by meeting with war veterans and police officers who received our dogs, and through meeting the incarcerated individuals who raised our dogs, she saw how the dogs transformed those peoples' lives as well.

Barbara sponsored dogs in honor of friends' birthdays and other special events, thereby spreading the word of our work further. She attended more prison graduations than we can count; she introduced us to more people than we can count; she suggested people for our Board of Directors, including three who are currently serving: Jim Hodges, Eric Johnson, and Gordon VeneKlasen.

The gratitude we feel for having known Barbara is huge; the loss we feel upon her leaving us is even larger. She will live on in our work forever. Everyone should be so lucky as to have had a Barbara Gladstone in their lives.

Photo by PBB

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OUR MISSION

Puppies Behind Bars (PBB) trains incarcerated individuals to raise service dogs for wounded war veterans and first responders, facility dogs for police departments, and explosive-detection canines for law enforcement. Puppies enter prison at the age of 8 weeks and live with their incarcerated puppy-raisers for approximately 24 months. As the puppies mature into well-loved, well-behaved dogs, their raisers learn what it means to contribute to society rather than take from it.

Puppies Behind Bars is a non-profit organization under the guidelines set forth in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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