

Dogs help provide support in courtrooms

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By Kathleen Gray, USA TODAY

Judge Brian MacKenzie holds Amos, who is being trained as a courthouse dog in Michigan to help children who have to testify. This program is based on one in the state of Washington.



By Regina H. Boone, Detroit Free Press

The young woman in Seattle was having second thoughts about testifying in the 2008 trial of a man accused of abducting and raping her.

"That's when we brought Ellie on board," said King County senior prosecuting attorney Ellen O'Neill Stephens said.

Ellie isn't a counselor or a psychiatrist, she's an 8-year-old Labrador retriever. The King County prosecutor's office uses Ellie to help calm victims and witnesses of violent attacks.

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"When things got tough, she was able to focus on Ellie and describe the attack," Stephens said. "She told me that just holding the leash made her feel more in control." The attacker was found guilty, and Ellie accompanied the woman to the sentencing.

The idea of using dogs to ease the tension of being in a courtroom is gaining popularity across the country. [CourthouseDogs.com](#) began in Seattle when Stephens took her son's service dog, Jeeter, to work and discovered that the dog had a calming effect on young witnesses. The prosecutor's office started using Labradors Ellie and Jeeter as courthouse dogs in 2003 for pretrial interviews and in courtrooms. Now the practice is spreading across the country to courts in Texas, California, Florida, Missouri and Michigan.

"For a child, having the dog there (in court) can make a huge difference," Stephens said. The specially trained dogs provide a non-threatening presence for such victims, who may find it difficult to talk to an adult about a violent crime, she said.

The dogs go through about two years of training at centers such as Canine Companions for Independence in Santa Rosa, Calif., which has trained 300 facility dogs, seven of which have been placed in courthouse settings. The training includes two phases. Volunteer puppy raisers teach the dogs basic commands, such as come, sit, stay and lie down. The dogs then go to a training center such as Canine Companions for Independence for six months to learn more advanced commands, such as picking up dropped items, opening doors or coping with crowds.

Trained to be still

Some of the dogs become service animals for the disabled and others go on to courtroom work, said Jeanine Konopelski, director of marketing for Canine Companions for Independence. Training and

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maintenance for a dog for an average of eight to 10 years costs \$45,000, Konopelski said, all of which is covered by contributions.

For courtroom work, the dogs are trained to stay totally still during interviews or testimony.

On a recent January afternoon, Famous Amos, an 18-month-old chocolate Labrador, wandered the District Court hallways in Novi, Mich., kissing up to judicial staff and wagging his tail at visiting attorneys.

Late last year, District Judge Brian MacKenzie brought Amos to his Novi courthouse to help ease the fears of victims preparing to testify.

Amos, who still has the loping gait of a puppy, was trained at Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester. Amos was being trained to work with the blind, but he could not keep himself from pulling on a leash, so he had a "career change," his handlers like to say. Leader Dogs donated his services, including \$20,000 worth of training, and more than a year of one-on-one time with trainers, as a courtroom dog. Amos is on call at the Novi courthouse, and MacKenzie has received inquiries about the program from across southeast Michigan.

"This dog may end up in a courtroom somewhere in the region every day. And while that wouldn't be a good thing," MacKenzie said, because it means more children are becoming victims of violent crime, "it will be an important thing."

'Paws and Order: SDU'

In Houston, the Harris County Bar Association asked the district attorney's office to start its own courthouse dog program. The result was "Paws and Order: SDU," or special dog unit, launched in November.

Paws and Order features six dogs, handled by volunteers who bring the pooches to the courthouse once a month. Because of privacy concerns, the dogs are not allowed in courtrooms or to be present during interviews, Harris County Assistant District Attorney Donna Hawkins said.

"The dogs are meeting with children who have witnessed domestic violence," Hawkins said. "And it's just amazing to see the smile on their faces and how much less stress they have after playing with the dogs."

In southern Missouri, therapist Diane Silman uses Simon, her 2-year-old black Labrador, on an almost daily basis to help with interviews and court testimony of abused children and domestic violence victims.

"The dog is non-judgmental and is so soothing," said Silman, executive director of the Ozark Foothills Child Advocacy Center in Doniphan, Mo., which conducts pretrial interviews.

Gray reports for the Detroit Free Press.

Contributing: L.L. Braisier, Detroit Free Press.

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