New Dog Program at Stafford Creek

Local News

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It was a trial run at Stafford Creek Corrections Center when three dogs from a local animal shelter were guided around the facility.

Within minutes of seeing the dogs - two Labrador retrievers and a beagle - several inmates had tears well up in their eyes.

The beagle became so excited from all the affection it received that it began to hyperventilate. "It was remarkable to see," Classifi cation Counselor Loren Taylor said. "I had read about what a positive impact dogs can have on inmates and vice-versa, but to actually see it in person was really powerful." That positive impact is the goal of a new dog program here at Stafford Creek.

A nonprofi t organization was chartered in December, inmates and staff members have built kennels and dog houses and the fi rst paws are expected to hit the ground during the fi rst week of March.

Inmates will care for and train dogs that are not obedient enough to be adopted from animal shelters in Grays Harbor County. After eight to 12 weeks, the dogs should be ready for adoption straight from the prison without having to return to animal shelters.

A similar program at Washington Corrections Center for Women has received national recognition for its success. "Any prison that has a dog program will tell you how benefi cial it is," said Deputy Prisons Director Dan Pacholke, who laid the groundwork for the new program in 2008 while he was Superintendent at Stafford Creek. "It helps with inmate behavior, it teaches them about compassion, and it's great for the community." Taylor, who coordinates with local animal shelters, says research shows that dog programs have a therapeutic benefi t for inmates. "A lot of inmates have never had this type of responsibility and sense of empathy before," she said. "And an inmate in the program will work hard to stay out of trouble because they know they'll lose their dog if they do."

The program does not require any taxpayer dollars. Prison staff members helped to establish a nonprofi t organization, Pawfect Connections, which will host fundraisers to buy food, treats and toys and will arrange for adoptions. The goal is to eventually have about 30 dogs in four minimum-security units at Stafford Creek.

The dogs will graduate from the program and will be replaced by other dogs from local animal shelters. More than 120 inmates applied to join the program before it starts. Sgt. Tim McCandless took part in the screening process and was impressed by many of their responses. "We asked them why they wanted to be part of a dog program, and lot of them talked about how they've taken so much from society over the years and how this gives them an opportunity to give something back," McCandless said. "This really means a lot to them."

Dogs that are identifi ed as particularly skilled will be sent to Washington Corrections Center for

Women for training as service dogs for the deaf and blind.

Eventually Stafford Creek hopes to be able to train service dogs as well. "This is a great program on a lot of levels," Stafford Creek Superintendent Pat Glebe said. "It will help modify offender behavior; it spares a dog that wouldn't be adopted otherwise, and at no expense to the taxpayers. These types of restorative justice programs are good for the facility, offender and the community."

By Chad Lewis West Team Leader, Communications