

Paws and Stripes College Program: Inmates Perceptions and the Impact on the Community

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of prison inmates participating in the Paws and Stripes College program. The Paws and Stripes College program involves incarcerated inmates training local humane shelter canines' obedience training techniques using the AKC Canine Good Citizen model. Using secondary data from self-report questionnaires completed by the inmates, this study sought to explore how the inmates felt before and after their exposure to the Paws and Stripes College program. Specifically, if the inmates felt that participation in the program had helped them or not, and if so, how. The Paws and Stripes College program revealed a positive impact on inmate increased knowledge and skills in animal training, leading them to better communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal behaviors which can enhance future employability. Homeless canines benefited by finding valued homes to care for them while providing a useful service to families and those with special needs. The community benefits from improvements in inmate behavior while incarcerated and their productivity toward their family members and society once released. Subsequently, special populations were served by the trained canines as animal assisted therapy dogs for child welfare programs and for veterans that suffered with the side effects of trauma.

KEYWORDS

Animal assisted therapy; Service animals; Prison animal training

INTRODUCTION

An Inside look at a Prison Animal Training Program

Generally, the public is motivated by one concept in dealing with prisoners: punishment.

The mission of the federal prison system is to “protect society by confining offenders in the controlled

environments of prisons and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, cost-efficient, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens” [1]. The public gives little thought to rehabilitation until confronted with the escalating cost of incarcerating and re-offending individuals. Rehabilitation of prisoners and the ability to

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reintegrate into society must be a priority if we want to make offending individuals functioning members of society while lowering the financial cost to the community. We must consider novel approaches to rehabilitating felons, including using dogs, horses, and other animals to teach inmates life-enhancing skills [2].

Project Pooch was one of the first programs to bring incarcerated juveniles together with abandoned and abused dogs. Joan Dalton, Principle of McLaren Juvenile Correctional Facility in Woodburn, Oregon started the first project pooch program in 1993. In 1999, project pooch obtained nonprofit status and hired a project manager. Students who participated in the project pooch program learned long lasting life skills. Not only did they learn dog grooming and canine training but they studied the health and well-being of animals. The inmates worked and performed duties by assisting with the operation of a boarding kennel where the dogs received training and were grooming upon discharge. The skills ascertained by working in the kennel and training the canines and be utilized in most communities because boarding and grooming facilities are a commodity in constant need [3].

Prisons and juvenile detention centers across America and globally have begun to implement animal-training programs in which inmates are able to train a wide variety of animals for service positions. Many of the canines trained within the prison walls have gone on to:

- to assist the physically challenged persons (ie, Blind, Deaf, Mobility Impaired);
- to assist mentally challenged persons (ie., depressed, anxious, PTSD, lonely);
- to assist Police agencies and the Military;
- to be Canine Good Citizens for Families;
- to be therapy dogs for use in nursing and retirement homes, schools and counseling;
- to rehabilitate Race Horses and Wild Mustangs;
- and in therapeutic treatment planning [4].

Pioneer David Lee started the first successful animal therapy program in Lima, Ohio in 1975 in a United States prison at the Oakwood Forensic Center (formerly the Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane) after he noticed inmates caring for an injured bird. He began a 90-days study comparing patients with pets, to patients without pets and the results exceeded expectation: research showed reduced incidents of violence, decreased use of medications, and lessened the number of suicide attempts. Ultimately, his prison program went on to train the first guide dogs and ran a large successful farm [4].

Dr. Leo Bustard and Kathy Quine (known as Sister Pauline), were two pioneers who laid the foundation for starting over 17 dog training programs in different correctional facilities throughout the United States. The benefits derived from their dog training programs included: inmates increased self-esteem, increased marketable work skills, and increased earned college credit. An additional benefit of the program was that dogs from the local Humane Society were spared euthanasia and had a productive life by being trained to be service dogs for people with special needs [2].

Jennifer Wesely, a professor of criminology at the University of North Florida, conducted research that demonstrated the positive behavioral effects of prison animal programs (PAPs). These behavioral effects include enhanced empathy, emotional intelligence, improved communication skills, greater patience, self-control and trust. Wesely, who is studying focus groups of inmates who have participated in the program, is looking at how the program can affect "criminogenic masculinity."

Professor Wesely is researching the idea that some marginalized men grow up in conditions or cultures where they don't have access "to the mainstream ways to be a man" and "learn lessons through abuse, poverty and social exclusion." Professor Wesely noted in her research

that a majority of the inmates had early lessons in masculinity and learned through very abusive behaviors that they could never show weakness. Many learned they had to kind of shut down that aspect of their identity in order to survive out in the streets [5].

The focus of this inmate animal training study took place at the Brevard County Sheriff's Office in Melbourne, Florida which operates the Paws and Stripes College, rescuing shelter dogs and training them to be adoptable family and/or service dogs for veterans. Many of these programs are non-profit and are funded through donations, grants, animal-protection groups, and dedicated volunteers. The community volunteers assist the inmates' training program by taking the dogs on trips outside the prison to get them used to different environments, people, and in many cases working environments they would not find within the prison walls.

METHOD

Research Design

The researchers utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to gather data. The secondary data involved self-reported questionnaires which were collected by prison staff. The utilization of self-report questionnaires was designed to address research questions about the inmates' perception of their involvement in the Paws and Stripes College program, a subjective approach [6] allows the researchers to gain insight into the perceptions of the participating inmates in the program. Nine open-ended questionnaires were completed by a combination of both male and female adult inmates who were actively engaged in the Paws and Stripes College program. The inmates' responses focused on the benefits and challenges of participating in the Paws and Stripes College program and sought to explore how the inmates felt before and after their exposure to the Paws on Parole program.

Specifically, the study sought to understand if the inmates felt that participation in the program had helped them or not, and if so, how. The researchers' study received Institutional Review Board approval from the correctional facility for the project. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to initiating interviews.

Participant Selection

The study explored nine canine handler questionnaires previously completed by incarcerated adult male and female participants 18 years and older incarcerated at the Melbourne, Florida Correctional Institute. The inmates consisted of various ethnic groups, who had a history of direct human or property violence. Participants at the time of the study, were incarcerated inmates of the Melbourne Florida Correctional Institute who had willingly volunteered to participate in the study and had been actively involved in the Paws and Stripes College program for animal training. The training sessions were performed by a certified dog training professional participating in the program for at least one year. The survey was self-administered by the inmates and collected by the prison staff in an established routine manner that currently exists. No personal identifiers of the inmates were included on the surveys that were collected by the Principal Investigator and Co-Principal Investigator. The questionnaire survey was administered and collected by the Brevard County Paws and Stripes College program. The secondary data collected and reviewed will be kept confidently secured for 7 years in a locked file draw behind a locked office door in the Principle Investigator's Office and will only be accessed by the researchers on the team.

Data Collection

Data was gathered using a researcher-designed questionnaire containing questions focused on the impact of the Paws and Stripes College program on various

aspects of inmates' communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal behaviors.

The inmate's responses focused on their perceptions about how the Paws and Stripes College program impacted their lives inside prison, their hopes for their lives outside of prison, and how it affected the animals being trained. More specifically, the inmates were asked to reveal if they felt participation in the program had influenced them and if so, how it had altered their lives; or if not, why not.

Data Analysis

All questionnaires were transcribed verbatim. A three-step process [7] was used to analyze the data gathered from interviews. Triangulation (through researcher memoing, coding, and peer debriefing as an audit trail), was used to analyze the data gathered from interviews. Open coding was used to identify 30 common ideas and experiences expressed by participants during the answering of questions. Subsequently; the individual categories were "coded" with descriptive labels.

Next, axial coding was used to condense the number of categories identified during open coding, by combining categories with similar ideas. Lastly, selective coding was used to identify core ideas present in the previously-identified themes from the categories. Both researchers participated in the coding process. If researchers did not initially agree on the chosen themes, the coding process was reinitiated by reviewing and discussing common ideas, which were then condensed to more relevant categories that both researchers agreed upon.

RESULTS

Main Themes

Four broad themes emerged from the data

Inmates benefits

Therapeutic responses

Reduced inmate's stressors of being in jail; increased inmates' patience; increase inmate's sense of community purpose.

Job skills

Increase potential inmate employability in work with animals, increase inmate's knowledge of animal training skills for personal usage with work with own/family animals.

Canine benefits

Shelter dog's obedience training making them more adoptable; dogs' service training skills make them more adoptable; increased adoptions of shelter dogs and decreased chances for euthanasia.

Prison facility benefits

Improves inmates' satisfaction with doing prison time reducing problem behavior; increases the inmates' visibility and appreciation by the community; increases positive communication between prison staff and inmates.

Inmates recommendations for changes in the paws and stripes program

No dogs should be returned to the shelter:

"Stop dogs not adopted from having to be returned to the shelter"; expand on dog training schedules making them more evenly distributed; and allows dogs to be housed with inmates to increase social skills in the canines.

Findings

Direct quotes from inmates

No participants' names were known to the researchers to further protect the inmates' confidentiality.

"Maybe I'll try to get a job in this area of work. Train and handle my dog correctly. Talk to people about their dogs, teach them what I have learned."

“The many times I have visited shelters I would always think to myself how cool it would be to work with animals, especially those in need of love and proper attention. Now I feel that with all the knowledge I have I would qualify for a job handling the animals.”

“This program has absolutely changed my life. I have learned to love myself and other people, realizing none of us are perfect and if we fail, we pick yourself up and try again. I have developed patience and tolerance a willingness to overcome them. I have learned to be victorious rather than defeated.”

“Yes, paws and stripes is therapeutic, spending time with the dogs affected me and the dogs in a positive way. Making a difference in the lives of people that need our dogs, once they get adopted helped to give me self-confidence”.

“Having a program like this is such an asset to the community. These dogs become helpers and healers and it’s really amazing to see them get matched up with a person who needs them. It helps the dogs to.”

“Initially I was apprehensive about training the dogs because they have such important jobs to do. I was nervous about messing up their training, but Deputy Fay (Mrs. Muller) & Corporal Lamp helped to ease my nervousness and teach me in a respectful way which gave me confidence to train”.

“Dogs shouldn’t get sent back to the shelter because they didn’t have anyone looking to adopt them, we should just continue to train the dog”.

“Bitter sweet, because I’m happy they found a home, but sad at the same time because I get attached to them”.

DISCUSSION

Participants’ responses regarding their experiences with the Paws and Stripes College program results indicated

that this particular inmate animal prison program provided therapeutic benefits to the inmates by improving their time spent in jail due to reducing stressors such as boredom, depression, and anxiety. The program was instrumental in increasing the inmate's confidence and improving their communication skills through a self-expressed sense of purpose, and perceived job enhancement through the development of employable skills (canine training, grooming, animal behavior). The inmates also developed skills not just limited to canine training, but skills that would help them adjust to the outside world through expansion of responsible behavior, patience and empathetic caring toward another living entity. Most importantly, the inmates learned to respect themselves and others while building trust, confidence and independence in both canines and humans.

The participants in this study discussed difficulties functioning within their prison environment with regard to both coping and communication skills. The Paws and Stripes College program appeared to help the participants become more conscious of, and more mindful of their various emotions. Through learning how to process and manage their emotions during their work in animal training, the inmates were better able to effectively utilize appropriate interpersonal and communication skills. In turn, the inmates’ felt this made them more compassionate and successful trainers while helping to approach and resolve conflict within their daily interactions with staff and each other. In addition, all nine participants discussed the value of learning to work together with an animal in order to achieve successful alternative outcomes. In particular, several participants discussed the benefits of spending time with different canines, as they felt this helped them learn to understand and interact with different personalities and challenges.

Inmates expressed feeling that working with different breeds and temperaments of canines helped them learn to

interact with people with different personalities in their families and within the current prison environment.

The participants noted that humans can be judgmental, and many times they are judged for being incarcerated. The inmates expressed that although they had committed crimes, that the majority of people do not understand the individual situations that led them to committing a criminal act. The inmates reported the Paws and Stripes College program environment and the presence of a non-judgmental animal provided them a sense of security, allowing for self-exploration of their behaviors and choices in life which ultimately affected their understanding of themselves and of others.

IMPLICATIONS

The human-animal interaction component proves to be a unique aspect utilized in the Paws and Stripes College program and may contribute to its effectiveness. The current study revealed how the Paws and Stripes College program helps to improve inmates' communication skills, conflict resolution strategies and interpersonal behaviors within their lives, and has been proven to benefit the shelter animals as well. The shelter animals improve their obedience skills, social skills, and their trained purpose to serve those with specific needs such as veterans with PTSD and children within the protective services system. These canines find and provide companionship and value to individuals, families, and their communities, no longer facing euthanasia and being unwanted.

Additional research is needed to explore the process by which Paws on Parole College program helps improve

the inmates' behavior while they are incarcerated and a follow up study conducted after they are released into society [8]. Furthermore, experimental studies comparing the Paws and Stripes College program to other forms of prison training programs utilized with this population would highlight the relative effectiveness of this approach.

An additional study comparing animal training programs versus more traditional forms of prison vocational training programs is warranted. Most importantly, we must understand that the Paws and Stripes College program, like many others, produces a "win-win situation: It's good for the dogs, often adopted from shelters where they might otherwise be euthanized and it's a wonderful gift for special populations of individuals who can ultimately experience a new world of freedom with a dog at their side. Canines, now trained, can assist mobility impaired individuals, medic alert, hearing impaired individuals, and the elderly; thus, becoming companion, therapy and service dogs. The Paws and Stripes College program study revealed the positive impact on inmate increased knowledge and skills in animal training, leading participating inmates to better communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal behaviors which ultimately has the capacity to enhance future employability. Homeless canines benefited by finding valued homes to care for them while providing a useful service to families and those with special needs. The community benefits from improvements in inmate behavior while incarcerated and their productivity in society once released thus, creating the potential to forever change the lives of the inmates [9].

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