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Therapy dogs easing stress in Orange County Recovery Courts



Recovery Courts can be very stressful environments, and not only for the individuals who are justice-involved and in recovery for substance use. The professionals who work with and on behalf of these clients – treatment providers, judges, court staff, DSS employees, attorneys, prosecutors, probation officers – often become emotionally invested in the outcomes. The impact when a client suffers a relapse stretches beyond his/her immediate family members.

“Drug Treatment Courts require tremendous investment from the participants and from the court teams,” said Caitlin Fenhagen, Director of Orange County’s Criminal Justice Resource Department. “Recovery is a long process, and there are often setbacks and relapses along the way. Court sessions can be difficult for participants and their families, but also for the court staff dedicated to supporting their long-term recovery.”

In an attempt to ease stress levels in Orange County’s Drug Treatment Courts, a local non-profit has started making therapy dogs available before court sessions begin. Eyes, Ears, Nose & Paws is an organization based in Carrboro that trains and places Mobility Assistance and Medical Alert Dogs.

Fenhagen says one of the court team stakeholders attended a professional training conference in Houston, where she learned about the idea of using therapy dogs in drug courts. Fenhagen and other court team members were familiar with EENP because of their work locally and their commitment to working with inmates in state correctional facilities to train their dogs, so she approached EENP Executive Director Maria Ikenberry about the idea of helping in the therapeutic courts.

“We were so excited about this,” said Ikenberry. “It’s another opportunity for us to have an impact in the criminal justice system. We are really grateful to the judges and staff for being so enthusiastic about the idea.”

Orange County’s Family Treatment Court and the Recovery Court convene twice a month at the Chapel Hill Courthouse. Ikenberry said volunteers will bring dogs in training to the court before the morning and afternoon sessions. The visits are part of each dog’s training.

“The dogs are in training to become assistance dogs,” said Ikenberry. “As part of their training, they take field trips to public settings. It is an important part of their socialization process to meet folks in all sorts of settings. The work in these courts is stressful for participants and the staff. Our hope is to make it a smoother and more positive experience for everyone.”

The court team and judicial stakeholders endorsed the proposal by Fenhagen and Ikenberry, and the dogs made their first appearance Nov. 7.