

# Mental Health Court Therapy Dogs

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Ottawa's going to the dogs and loving it

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The documented benefits of spending time with a therapy dog include the reduction of stress and feelings of isolation and increased feelings of happiness and better interpersonal communication, all of which could be beneficial to people in attendance at the Ottawa Provincial Courthouse. In September 2018 the Ottawa Mental Health Court began bringing local therapy dogs to the Ottawa courthouse's busiest hallways to interact with anyone who wanted, including accused persons and their families and acquaintances, court staff, counsel, service providers, witnesses and police officers. The program received the enthusiastic endorsement of all stakeholders in the Courthouse and has since expanded. The future of the project hopefully will include further expansion, more formal evaluation, promoting the program to other jurisdictions, and supporting other animal-centric MHC initiatives.



Research has well established that visits with therapy animals reduce anxiety and feelings of isolation and increase positive emotions in stressed populations like hospital patients and university students.<sup>i</sup> The effects of spending even a few minutes with a therapy dog can include more relaxed breathing, improved communication skills, and reduced feelings of isolation and distress.<sup>ii</sup> These benefits can last hours afterwards, even when the interaction with the therapy animal is brief.<sup>iii</sup> As well, the positive effects of interaction with a therapy animal have been found to be particularly significant for psychiatric patients and those with mental illness.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, because therapy animals programs are usually run by volunteers, pet therapy is a very cost effective way to reduce stress.<sup>v</sup> For this reason, therapy animals regularly visit hospitals, universities and colleges, nursing homes, and many other workplaces and community locations where people have come to enjoy their benefits.

The Ottawa Provincial Courthouse, at 161 Elgin Street, is the central courthouse for criminal and civil matters within Ottawa city limits. In particular, the 1<sup>st</sup> floor houses the central criminal remand court, the Ontario Court of Justice trial courtrooms, two bail courts, a plea court, Youth Court, drug remand court and Drug Treatment Court, Mental Health Court, as well as the offices of duty counsel, Bail Crown and other service providers in the criminal justice system. The hallway is usually busy with accused persons and their friends and families, witnesses, police, counsel, service providers and courthouse staff.

Like many other public buildings, the Ottawa Courthouse has allowed people to bring their support and service animals into the building, provided that animal has an official certificate indicating this status. That animal, however, is there to help the person who requires it, and does not interact with anyone else. Similarly, our

Courthouse permits witnesses to be accompanied by a therapy dog while they are in a stressful situation, such as during interviews or, with the permission of the court, while testifying. But therapy dogs who attend with vulnerable witnesses in effect become service dogs, in that they are there to support that witness only and do not interact with the general population.

There can be little doubt that attending criminal court is stressful. Most people on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Elgin Street Courthouse would rather not be there, whether they are accused persons, their friends and family members or witnesses. Similarly the nature of criminal court is such that even service providers, counsel, police officers, court clerks and reporters, judges, and other participants in the criminal justice system can and do experience anxiety and stress.

In January 2018, the author of this paper began trying to find a way to bring therapy animals to visit people in Mental Health Court on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Ottawa Courthouse the same way therapy animals had been visiting other stressed populations in the city of Ottawa. The idea was immediately championed by Justice Heather Perkins-McVey, our Mental Health Court Committee Chair.

The first step was finding a community partner to deliver the pet therapy. The Ottawa branch of Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC), was selected, as it is a volunteer run national non-profit with extensive experience delivering therapy animal visits in diverse Ottawa locations and the parent organization has insurance that covers all volunteers and their animals. TPOC dogs are assessed to ensure they are suitable and TPOC volunteers undergo vulnerable sector record checks. Some volunteers also have training in mental health first aid. TPOC therapy animals visit Ottawa universities, colleges, hospitals, nursing homes and many other places. In addition, for the past year, TPOC volunteers and their dogs had been going for

weekly visits to the Ottawa Police Station, just down the road from the Courthouse on Elgin Street, a factor we thought would assist in getting support for their attendance in the Courthouse.

The second step was convincing stakeholders to endorse the project. All members of Mental Health Court, as well as defence and Crown counsel, courtroom staff and Courthouse security, were immediately enthusiastic, however the approval of the Courthouse administration was harder to secure. Letters and to face to face meetings with building administration were all without success until Justice Perkins-McVey undertook the negotiations. After months of discussions and meeting with Justice Perkins-McVey, the building administration agreed to allow a pilot project, with compromises including the type of dogs and limiting the number of visits.

Ottawa's Mental Health Court runs Monday, Wednesday and Friday, usually in Courtroom 8, in the centre of the 1st floor corridor. The court begins at 9:30 am. Twice a month, the court runs the MHC Clinic where a psychiatrist and nurse from the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Facility assess MHC clients. On clinic days, MHC clients wait outside of Courtroom 8, often for hours, waiting for their turn to be seen in the clinic. The pilot project began with the dogs attending during MHC Clinic Mondays.

On Monday, September 10, our first two TPOC dogs came to Ottawa Courthouse, O Yo a rescued greyhound and Sam, a King Charles spaniel. The volunteers and their dogs patrolled the hallway outside Courtroom 8, in the morning at the start of MHC, making their dogs available for anyone who wanted to interact with them. TPOC volunteers wear a red shirt, and each dog has a harness with its name and we had a sign saying that the dogs were there to be patted. Our experienced

volunteers also know how to present their dog for interaction without forcing it if the person was reluctant. Most of the time, people's hesitancy stemmed from their belief that they should not interfere with service dogs performing their duty—the joy that lit up their faces when they realized the dogs were there for them was very moving.

The dogs were an immediate hit. That first visit lasted considerably longer than anticipated because it was hard to take the dogs away from the enthusiastic reaction. The next visit two weeks later was the same. Within a short time, the MHC dog days became an anticipated treat.

It was clear that a great many people enjoyed the comfort of patting a dog. There are many examples of how the dogs have helped people in the courthouse: the MHC client who sobbed in happiness while holding a dog, missing the dog she had to give up when she was placed in community housing; the person who shared that her family dog had been the only comfort in a childhood of abuse; distraction for fearful families and children waiting outside bail courts and nervous witnesses and police officers waiting their turn to testify; and the many court reporters and clerks and counsel who rush to hug their favourite dog.

Our TPOC volunteers also reported that the interactions in the courthouse were amongst the most fulfilling they had ever had with their therapy pets.

The nature of people's business on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Ottawa Courthouse makes it difficult to get a formal assessment of the extent of the stress reduction benefits of the MHC Therapy Dog Program, however, we have received only positive feedback and the full support of all of the stakeholders in the Ottawa Courthouse.

In December, we decided to have a bake sale in support of the program. While the volunteers deliver the program at no cost, parking in downtown Ottawa is

expensive and we hoped to raise enough funds to cover volunteer parking. On the day of the bake sale, clerks, court reporters, service providers, defence counsel, crowns and judges baked and bought an astonishing amount of cookies. Numerous people made home-made dog treats. We raised nearly \$900 in less than 3 hours. In June, Probation Services in the Ottawa Courthouse, on their own initiative, held their own bake sale on behalf of the TPOC dogs. They raised \$1000. If a bake sale is a referendum on the value of the dogs, it is clear that people really love having them in the Courthouse.

In March 2019, the building administration asked us to expand the program. We are now no longer a pilot project, but a full initiative of the Ottawa MHC, aimed at improving the mental health of everyone in the Ottawa Courthouse. Our dogs now attend the Courthouse every Monday morning, and also go to Drug Treatment Court and Youth Mental Health Court. We also have plans to expand further, increasing the frequency of visits and possibly having the dogs attend other floors of the Courthouse. TPOC dogs also now also work with Ottawa's Victim-Witness Assistance Program, so their presence in the Courthouse is a regular occurrence.

We have established a committee of stakeholders and volunteers to ensure that our program remains supported and informed and that we continue to build on our success. And in the future, we may explore more formal ways of assessing our impact. We also hope to support other animal based MHC initiatives. Our experience has been so positive that we encourage others to use this cost-effective way to promote the well-being and mental health of the people that participate in the criminal justice system in their jurisdictions.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For example among the many literature reviews:

Johnson, R. (2013) Promoting One Health: The University of Missouri Research Center for Human/Animal Interaction. *Mo Med*. 2013 May-Jun; 110(3): 197–200.

Lundqvist M., Carlsson P, Sjö Dahl R., Theodorsson E, & Levin L. (2017) Patient benefit of dog-assisted interventions in health care: a systematic review. *BMC Complement Altern Med*. 17(1):358. doi: 10.1186/s12906-017-1844-7.

For an example of the methodology to assess the effect of pet therapy:

Fiocco A. & Hunse A. (2017) The buffer effect of therapy dog exposure on stress reactivity in undergraduate students. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*.; 14(7): 707. doi: 10.3390/ijerph14070707

<sup>ii</sup> Ward-Griffin E., Klaiber P., Collins H., Owens R., Coren S., & Chen F. (2018) Petting away pre-exam stress: The effect of therapy dog sessions on student well-being. *Stress and Health* Volume 34, Issue3 Pages 468-473. doi.org/10.1002/smi.2804, as reported at <https://news.ubc.ca/2018/03/12/sit-stay-heal-study-finds-therapy-dogs-help-stressed-university-students/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Lundqvist et al.

<sup>v</sup> Bulette Coakley A. & Mahoney E., (2009) Creating a therapeutic and healing environment with a pet therapy program. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* Volume 15, Issue 3, August 2009, Pages 141-146 doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2009.05.004