

Inmate Perceptions: The Impact of a Prison Animal Training Program

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of jail 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 canine good citizen model as well as teaching the canines skills in which to participate as comfort/emotional support dogs. 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 was beneficial to them or not, and if so, how.

Methods: The jail staff administered and collected the questionnaires via a self-report instrument completed by the inmates. Each inmate in the Paws and Stripes College program were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire reflecting on the time they are serving in the jail and time they have participated in the Paws and Stripes College program regarding how they felt before joining the Paws and Stripes College program, how they feel being a part of the Paws and Stripes College program, and how if they believed they program made an impact on the dogs and the community and if so, how. Each self-reported questionnaire was collected, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes.

Results: All participants experienced positive reactions while participating in the Paws and Stripes College program, feeling the program equipped them with perceived increased employment skills and communication skills. The Paws and Stripes College program improved their emotional state by offering them more self-confidence, patience and increased animal training skills. The inmates indicated the animal training they had learned helped them better address both the canine's they were working with and their own emotions and conflicts, increased coping strategies for everyday situations, and improved their outlook during their incarceration, and each believed the training would help them with employment and their personal lives after their release. Inmates felt they had taken from society and by participating in the Paws and Stripes program they were able to give back to society.

Conclusion: The Paws and Stripes College program has a positive impact on inmate increased knowledge and skills in animal training leading them to better communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal behaviors which are believed to enhance future employability, self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, the inmates were impressed with the enhanced adoptability of the shelter canines that completed the training, and their service to the community. Correctional facilities may want to consider recommending an inmate and canine training program as a viable intervention for improving inmates' behavior and emotional states during incarceration and improve chances for inmates' successful functioning by assisting with finding meaningful employment once they are released. In addition, the homeless canines benefit by the Paws and Stripes College program by not being euthanized, finding valued homes to care for them, and the ability to provide useful service to both families and those with special needs.

Keywords: Animal assisted therapy; Service animals; Prison animal training

Background

Prisons and juvenile detention centers across America and globally are implementing animal-training programs in which offenders within the facilities train a wide variety of animals for service positions: to assist the physically challenged persons (i.e., Blind, Deaf, Mobility Impaired); to assist mentally challenged persons (i.e., depressed, anxious, PTSD, lonely); to assist Police Forces 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; to use birds and other small animals in therapeutic treatment planning [1]. Pioneer David Lee started the first successful animal therapy program in Lima [2], 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-day 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. The prison trained the first guide dogs and ran a large successful farm [1].

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 USA, and the benefits reported included: inmates increased self-esteem, increased marketable work skills, and increased earned college credit. Additionally, dogs from the local Humane Society were spared

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euthanasia and trained to be service dogs for people with special needs [3].

Another exceptional animal program that began in prison involved Dr. Ron Zaidlicz who began a horse training program at the State Penitentiary in Canon City, Colorado by purchasing three wild mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management. After inmates began training these horses a study was conducted and the results indicated that inmates assumed a nurturing role by caring for the mustangs, learning how to be gentle and affectionate. Today a number of correctional facilities have started animal training programs with their inmates to include a facility in Canton, Ohio where inmates train wild mustangs sold at prison auctions to save horses from injuries and overcrowding. At the California Correctional Center in Susanville the correctional facility runs a wild horse gentling program for public adoption. The Wyoming Honor Farm in Riverton began wild horse training in 1989, and the New York State Correctional Services trains low-risk prisoners to care for and re-train retired racehorses making them candidates for adoption. Additionally, the Charles Hickley School in Baltimore, Maryland uses a juvenile detention center to manage a farm on behalf of retired thoroughbred race horses.

A wide variety of correctional institutes offer many different animal training programs such as: the Washington State Correctional Center for Women which train service animals for the disabled. The Downeast Correctional Facility in Maine offers training for inmates in animal behavior, grooming and related vocational classes. The Prison Pups program at Bland Correctional Center in Virginia, trains canines to be service dogs, and The Pen Pals program at James River Correctional Center in Virginia saves shelter dogs from euthanasia makes them better candidates for adoption. The Second Chance Prison Canine Program at the Florence Correctional Center in Arizona offers an animal training and boarding service for private owners, which provides a lucrative service for the correctional center. The Branchville Correctional Center in Indiana trains service dogs for physically and mentally challenged children and teens with special needs. The Project Pooch located at the Oregon Youth Authority's McLaren Correctional facility trains unwanted dogs to be obedient family dogs while helping to save the animals from euthanasia [3].

The focus of this 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 and police. Many of these programs are non-profit and are funded through donations, grants, animal-protection groups, and dedicated volunteers who take the dogs on trips outside the prison to get them used to different environments, people, and in many cases working environments performing a service to the individuals and the community.

Method

Research design

The researchers utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to gather data. The secondary data involved self-reported questionnaires which were collected by jail staff as an internal formative evaluation of the program and was designed to address research questions about the inmates' perception of their involvement in the Paws and Stripes College program. This subjective approach allowed the researchers to gain insight into the perceptions' of the participating inmates in the program [4]. Open-ended questions were completed with nine male and female adult inmates 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, 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 handler questionnaires previously completed by incarcerated adult male and female participants 18 years and older, of all ethnic groups, who have a history of direct human or property violence incarcerated at the Cocoa, Florida, Brevard County Jail Complex, Paws and Stripes College program. Participants at the time of the study must be incarcerated and actively involved in the Paws and Stripes College program for animal training and willingly volunteered to participate in the study. 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 jail staff only 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 for data analysis provided by the Brevard County Sheriff's Office, Paws and Stripes College program. The secondary data collected and reviewed will be kept confidentially 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 (refer to Appendix) 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 inmates' responses focused on their perceptions about how the Paws and Stripes College program impacts their daily lives inside the jail and their hopes for their lives outside of the jail, and how it impacts the animals being trained. More specifically, the inmates were asked to reveal if they felt that participation in the program had helped them or not, and if so, how.

Data analysis

All questionnaires were transcribed verbatim. A three-step was used to analyze the data gathered from interviews [5]. Triangulation, through researcher memoing and coding was used to analyze the data gathered from interviews and peer debriefing were used to provide an audit trail. Open coding was used to identify 30 common ideas and experiences expressed by participants during the answering of questions; these 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 the principal and co-principal 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: Taught shelter dogs obedience training making them more adoptable; Taught dogs service training skills making them more adoptable; increased adoptions of shelter dogs and decreased chances for euthanasia.

Jail facility Benefits: Improves inmates satisfaction with doing jail time reducing problem behavior; increases the inmates visibility and appreciation by the community; increase positive communication between jail 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 allow 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 you 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. Mutter) and 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 inmate animal prison program provided therapeutic benefits to the inmates by improving their time spent in jail reducing stressors such as boredom, depression, and anxiety, increasing the inmates confidence and improving their communication skills through a self-expressed sense of purpose, and perceived job enhancement through the development of employable skills not limited to canine training, but also to include increases in responsible behavior and caring toward others. Most importantly the inmates learned to respect and be respected, and to trust others both canine and human.

Furthermore, in the present study, the participants discussed difficulties functioning within their prison environment with regard to both coping and communication skills. The Paws and Striped College program seemed to help the participants become aware of, and better in tune with, their emotions. Through learning how to process their emotions more clearly during their work in animal training, the inmates were better able to apply these same skills they were teaching the canines in their own everyday interactions, they became more effective at utilizing appropriate interpersonal skills and communication skills, and approaching and resolving conflict within their daily interactions with other inmates and prison staff. 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 this program helped them learn to interact more positively with people with different personalities in both their families and in the current jail environment. The participants noted that humans can be judgmental, and many times they are judged for being incarcerated even though they felt a majority of people do not understand what inmates have been through prior to their incarceration. The inmates reported that 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 were affecting 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 also proven to benefit the shelter animals as well. The shelter animals were provided with improved obedience skills, improved social skills, and through a trained purpose, was able to serve those with specific needs such as veterans with PTSD and children within the protective services system. These canines are able to provide companionship and value to individuals, families, and their communities, no longer facing euthanasia and being unloved. Additional research is needed to explore the process by which Paws

and Stripes College program helps improve the inmates' behavior while they are incarcerated. Furthermore, research continuing to follow the Paws and Stripes College program inmates after they are released to society should be conducted. Additionally, experimental studies comparing the Paws and Stripes College program to other forms of prison/jail training utilized with this population would highlight the relative effectiveness of this approach versus more traditional forms of prison/jail vocational training programs. Most importantly we must remember that the Paws and Stripes College program like many other similar canine programs produce a "...win-win-win situation: It's good for the dogs, often adopted from shelters where they'd be killed. It's good for the disabled, who experience a new world of freedom with the dogs at their sides, and it can forever change the lives of the inmates [6].

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