

Therapy Dog Program at NSYOF

by Damien Ramm, Casual Youth Officer, NSYOF

The North Slave Young Offenders facility offers a wide range of programming for their youth. One of these programs is St. John Ambulance Dog Therapy program. The program involves trained volunteer handlers and their well-trained furry friend visiting the youth in the facility. The program provides many different ways for the youth to benefit from this experience.

When the dogs enter the facility there is a positive change in the atmosphere. The youth become engulfed in curiosity and smiles, often with questions and comments flowing regularly. Sometimes the youth will all hang around the unit and take turns playing with and petting the dog(s) while asking questions of the owner. Other times the youth will take the dog outside and play with him or her. No matter what activity they choose to do many of the youth show a passion for dogs and/or animals and will often share past stories about dogs or attentively listen to the story of another. These experiences aid in building camaraderie and positive experiences with animals that – if nurtured to fruition – could develop into healthier behaviour and interaction with persons and animals alike.

The youth at NSYOF learn about basic animal training methods and principles as well as hearing stories about how the two (Handler and furball) had come to meet. The youth also take away stories from these experiences. I.e. – “Remember when Diego

was here and he tripped you up on your skates?”

Whether it is physical activity, relaxation, learning, or expressing, it seems that many of the youth always take a positive piece away from each visit from man’s best friend.

Because of the impact of the dogs in the facility many staff are scheduled to have their own dogs tested to see if they could one day provide the same service to youth or elders.

The St. John Ambulance Dog Therapy Program began in 1992 recognizing that many people can benefit physically and emotionally from regular contact with the unconditional love of a dog.

St. John Ambulance’s Therapy Dog Services takes a volunteer and their dog into seniors’ residences, nursing homes and now the young offender facility on a weekly basis. Partnerships have been established in these kinds of settings, where people are often restricted from having pets, to make the Therapy Dog visitation easier and on a regular basis.

Regular feedback from personnel in the host institutions has contributed to an increased interest in the program. On-going dialogue has also ensured that program expectations are being met for patients, volunteers and for St. John Ambulance.

Great care is taken in the selection of the dogs. All dogs are tested for temperament and

therapeutic qualities, and must be annually certified by their veterinarians as being up-to-date on all required vaccinations and in good general health. It is a requirement of the program that all dogs must be clean and thoroughly groomed before each visit.

Therapy Dog - Diego

