

“Letter to Lawmakers: A Victim’s Advocate Supports Therapy Dogs in the Courtroom”

Spring, 2011....Research has shown that pet therapy has an absolute calming effect on children in traumatic situations. What could be more traumatic than a child having to testify in a courtroom about sexual abuse at the hands of the offender who has a constitutional right to be present? My experience as a Victim Advocate who works with sexually abused children is that pet therapy has a tremendously positive effect on a child’s ability to testify and with less emotional scarring.

I have personally witnessed a child hug and love on a pet therapy dog before she walked into the courtroom and upon exiting, she physically laid her body down on top of the dog who reciprocated the unconditional love. It was a powerful moment for all of us at the culmination of this child’s long journey toward justice. This same dog had been present during the deposition and other pre-trial meetings and the child did not understand why the dog could not accompany her into the courtroom for her most difficult task.

Research has shown children are more likely to verbalize incidents of abuse when a dog is present to provide comfort and security. My goal is to protect abused children from further emotional trauma within the parameters of the criminal justice system. This law would allow some of the most vulnerable members of our society the courage to talk about horrific details of their abuse with the aid of man’s best friend at the last stage of the criminal justice process, in the courtroom where it is needed most.

There is no way for us to measure all of the effects of pet therapy on a victim of crime. What I do know is that the children who have the opportunity to have a pet therapy dog are less anxious and frightened about the process. They feel more supported. They can attribute a positive aspect to an emotionally challenging event. All this without words but with a simple touch of a paw or the feel of fur through their fingers or the lick of a tongue on a hand.

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