

# Transforming lives through service dogs

The POOCH Program provides a positive  
life-changing experience for inmates

BY ROBERT BRECKENRIDGE II





**Dogs are sources of unconditional love and affection, and having one around an incarcerated individual helps ease the stressful environment they are in and helps them learn to be more empathetic and develop prosocial skills.**



Photo courtesy Tender Loving Canines Assistance Dogs

Seeing a bright-eyed, excitable puppy walking with its owner and fighting the urge to pet it is nearly impossible. But pay close attention, because if the dog is wearing a certain colored vest, they are undergoing training to play a vital role in someone's life, so it is best not to distract them. Service dogs are used worldwide to help their owners mitigate a great number of disabilities. According to Assistance Dogs International (ADI), these incredibly smart and intuitive dogs are trained to work with people who use wheelchairs, have balance issues, have various types of autism, need seizure alert or response, have low blood sugar, have psychiatric disabilities and more. Their training allows them to help by performing various tasks, such as retrieving objects, assisting with balance, awaking their owner from nightmares, opening and closing doors, performing calming behaviors in the presence of triggers to facilitate reorientation, barking to seek help and even reminding veterans to take their medications or perform important tasks.

According to a report in *Veterinary Record* by Daniel Mills and Sophie Hall, the constant companionship of an animal has been shown to reduce anxiety, feelings of isolation and generally improves an individual's quality of life. This is especially important for those who have

a disability, and there are a multitude of organizations around the world that provide these dogs to those in need. Tender Loving Canines Assistance Dogs (TLCAD) is one organization that provides a special service that intersects the service animal world with the world of corrections. Based in San Diego County, California, TLCAD was incorporated in December 1998, and then became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in August 1999. In 2007, TLCAD received accreditation from ADI, a worldwide coalition of nonprofit programs that train and place assistance dogs. Through the ADI's standards and accreditation process, TLCAD began an innovative program, Prisoners Overcoming Obstacles & Creating Hope (POOCH), which teaches incarcerated individuals to train service dogs by using humane, evidence-based, positive reinforcement training techniques based on behavioral science.

## POOCH Program

All of TLCAD's service dogs are trained through the POOCH Program and are given to individuals with autism through their Leash-On-Life program, and service members and/or veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a traumatic brain injury (TBI) or mobility



Photo courtesy Tender Loving Canines Assistance Dogs

*Inmates from the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility with their service dogs in training.*

limitations through their At Ease Program. TLCAD also places service animals as “facility dogs” where they are paired with professionals that serve populations who benefit from animal-assisted intervention or therapy, such as health facilities, schools and courtrooms. This program places a puppy with two inmate trainers and lives with the inmates in the correctional facility. Twice a week, the inmates, with their paired pups, meet with a handler to learn positive reinforcement training techniques that are used to train the dogs. The trainers use clicker training, which, according to the American Kennel Club, is a behavioral science-rooted reward system that tells the dog that whatever they are doing when they hear the click, they will earn a reward. This type of training was originally developed by marine mammal trainers who, for example, had to find a way to reward a mammal such as a dolphin when they performed a certain action. This technique is useful because it is a bridge to communicate that a specific action will yield a reward (in this case, a treat). Trainers for the POOCH Program also use this method to create a stronger human-animal bond, and to create a “thinking” dog, which is crucial for the dog’s development as a service animal.

Through the course of this two-year program, each dog is taught over 40 cues to assist in everyday life situations that the dog will encounter with their future handler. The service dogs-in-training are also brought out of the prison twice a week for additional training and exposure to public places. The POOCH Program began at Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego in 2014, and since then, programs have also started at Mule Creek State Prison in Ione, California, as well as the Brig at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California.

## Transforming lives

The POOCH Program is an invaluable initiative that benefits all who partake in it. For the incarcerated trainers, the program greatly aids in rehabilitation by promoting positive behaviors. The TLCAD training curriculum not only teaches inmates the methods used to train their paired service dogs, but it also teaches them a new repertoire of social skills, better communication skills and creates a positive environment in the correctional facility. According to the Humane Society Institute for



Science and Policy, programs like POOCH have resulted in reduced recidivism for those who participate. Trainers experience personal growth through training the dogs by further developing patience, learning to manage emotions, enhancing decision-making and problem-solving skills, giving a sense of purpose and, most importantly, giving back to the community.<sup>1</sup> Simple human-animal interactions, alone, provide opportunities for personal growth in handlers and also encourages self-reflection as they often see parallels between the dogs' experiences and their own.<sup>2</sup> Dogs are intuitive animals and are able to perceive the emotions of their owner. This trait is also very important in becoming a service animal, as the slightest change in their owners' mood can be an indicator of a serious problem. Dogs are sources of unconditional love and affection, and having one around an incarcerated individual helps ease the stressful environment they are in and helps them learn to be more empathetic and develop prosocial skills. This transformative experience creates an emotional bond that can be transferred to other relationships in an inmate's life. These programs also create a calm and overall safer environment each day by having the dogs live in the correctional facilities.

## Receiving a new companion

After training is completed, TLCAD dogs are paired with applicants whose needs match the skills that the service dog has learned to ensure the long-term success of their placement. Recipients of these service dogs are required to attend TLCAD's service dog team training, which consists of three phases:

- **Foundation training:** This orients clients to their service dog and prepares them for life with their new partner. Recipients are taught the dog's trained foundational skills and custom skills suited for their new owner. Recipients are also taught TLCAD training methods in order to maintain and build upon their dog's skills throughout the years. This phase is vital in preparing the clients to utilize their service dog at home and out in public.
- **Adjustment and bonding:** After foundation training, clients return home with their dog and spend two weeks adjusting to home life. Remote video conference calls are scheduled with TLCAD staff twice a week for progress reports. This phase



Photos courtesy Tender Loving Canines Assistance Dogs

ensures the successful transfer of the dog's skills to their new home environment.

- **Certification:** After the bonding and adjustment period, TLCAD staff conduct a custom-training session with recipients in their home and community in order to fine tune the transfer of the dog's skills in a home environment. It assists in establishing routines, custom household rules and behavior plans, and community training guarantees that recipients are able to utilize their service dog to mitigate their disability and increase their independence. After completing a certification test, a graduation ceremony is held. After graduation, recipients receive continued support from TLCAD staff with scheduled check-ins.



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## Making a person whole

The POOCH Program is a holistic program that transforms the lives of all who are involved. By adhering to ADI standards and maintaining accreditation, this program provides an optimal environment for the service dogs-in-training and uses evidence-based best practices that results in a success rate of 70 percent for placement. The TLCAD training curriculum provides the dogs with crucial skills needed to be a companion for their future

owner. The service dogs-in-training are given trainers that are constantly with them for the first two formative years of their lives and are taught a variety of cues and techniques that are vital in improving the lives of the people who receive them after the training. A more peaceful correctional environment is key for developing skills that the incarcerated individuals will use upon their release — those who have participated in the program are at a lower chance to recidivate.

The healing power that service animals provide is without a doubt a life-changer and, in some cases, a life-saver for those who train and for those who receive their well-trained companion. As concluded by the report by Mills and Hall, the routine of animal care can provide daily stability and feelings of worth, as well as provide a distraction from negative events. With a proven success rate, the POOCH Program ultimately makes each community that is involved in better by both helping incarcerated individuals and the recipients who struggle with a disability. For more information, visit their website [www.tenderlovingcanines.org](http://www.tenderlovingcanines.org) or contact them via phone: (858) 461-6827 or email: [info@tlcad.org](mailto:info@tlcad.org).

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Mills, D., Hall, S. (2014) Animal-assisted interventions: making better use of the human-animal bond *Veterinary Record* 174, 269-273.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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