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TDCJ's volunteer-facilitated canine-assistance programs

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The Texas Department of Criminal Justice relies on volunteers to help deliver many important rehabilitation services to the incarcerated population, but the agency's volunteer-supported "dog programs" stand apart for their innovative nature, long track records of success and the assistance they provide to disabled veterans and the visually impaired.



Offenders in the Patriot PAWS program train service dogs for donation to disabled military veterans.

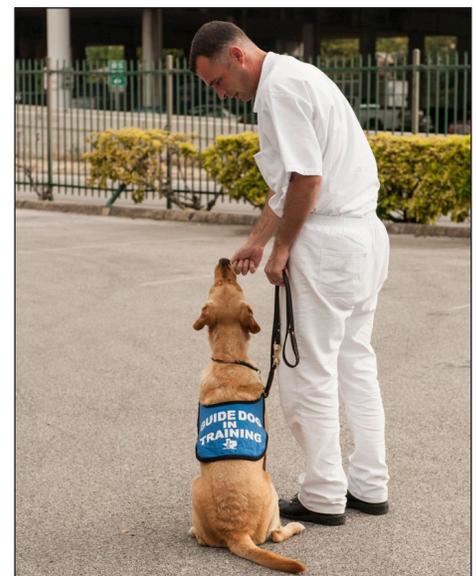
Through a partnership between TDCJ and Patriot PAWS Service Dogs, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, canine-assistance training programs began at the Boyd, Crain, and Murray units in 2008, with the mission to train the highest-quality service dogs and provide them at no cost to disabled American veterans. Offenders must meet eligibility requirements to participate in the program,

where Patriot PAWS volunteers teach them training techniques for basic service dog behaviors. Normally, it takes 18 months to two years of training for each dog to become a certified service dog. In addition to its training, offenders in the program are responsible for the dog's care 24 hours a day. Upon certification, the Patriot PAWS organization donates the dog to a disabled veteran in need, which avoids the expense to the vet of professional service dog training.

The PAWSitive Approach program located at the Dominguez State Jail is made possible through a 17-year collaboration between TDCJ and Guide Dogs of Texas, a provider of guide dogs to visually impaired Texans. Puppies in the program live in a dorm with the offender and are taught basic obedience and social manners. Offender participants, along with a correctional officer, routinely take the puppy into public areas so the puppy will become accustomed to a variety of sights and sounds. This is crucial as service dogs for the visually impaired must be able to remain calm and focused despite distractions in their surroundings. When the puppy masters basic training and has reached 12 months of age, it is returned to the Guide Dogs of Texas for more advanced training. After the dog

has successfully completed its training, it is carefully matched with a visually impaired owner for whom it will serve as a guide.

The Paws in Prison program, located at the Lockhart Correctional Facility, gives rescued dogs a second chance at adoption. Many of the dogs in this program have suffered abuse and have been rescued, leaving them unwanted as pets. Offenders in the program work with Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT) volunteers who provide obedience and basic skills training. The dogs live on the facility



An offender walks a puppy as part of canine's training to become a guide dog through the Dominguez State Jail PAWSitive Approach program.

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with the offenders, who care for the dogs 24 hours a day. Once the dog has successfully completed training, the volunteer organization reaches out to the community to find the dog a loving home.

A similar program at the Ellis Unit in Huntsville also trains shelter dogs to help make them more likely to be adopted. After participating in an eight-week course in which they learn to obey basic commands and become more comfortable around people and other animals, the dogs are returned to the Rita B. Huff Humane Society for adoption.

Through these volunteer-supported programs, incarcerated offenders are provided an opportunity to learn job responsibilities and develop a set of skills that might help them find employment upon their release. ●