

Connecticut May be 1st State to Codify Animal-Assisted Therapy for Trauma Victims

BY: | July 26, 2013

After the mass shooting last December in an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., state officials found dogs to be helpful therapeutic aids for counseling the surviving children. A new law will formalize a state-sponsored system for training social workers and dogs in animal-assisted therapy; the program also sets up criteria for quickly identifying qualified volunteers during or after a crisis.

Although individual organizations already provide animal-assisted therapy across the country, Connecticut may be the first state to codify a program into law. Amy McCullough, director of animal-assisted therapy for the American Humane Association, said she believed the Connecticut law to be the first of its kind. Gov. Dan Malloy signed the measure in early June, but is scheduled to sign it again as part of a ceremony Friday.

The law requires that volunteer canine response teams consist of several handlers and dogs that have been trained, evaluated and registered with an animal-assisted activity organization. The teams must operate on a volunteer basis and be available to respond within 24 hours of a crisis.

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After the Newtown shooting, state officials collaborated with nonprofits to build a play and art station at a nearby middle school. Therapy dogs were an integral part of helping surviving children heal emotionally, according to Steven Hernandez, an attorney for the state legislature's Commission on Children.

"They were a constant source of care, comfort and innocence," he told legislators at a committee hearing. "The dogs welcomed the children and sat with them. Their touch and sensitivity made what was almost unbearable, bearable."

Proponents of the measure cited studies that have found positive health effects on children who interact with animals, such as lowered blood pressure and decreases in cortisol -- a hormone associated with stress.

"They love unconditionally, are nonjudgmental, are empathetic, and enjoy the company of children," said Lauren Crowley, a licensed social worker at a school-based health center in New Britain, Conn, at a committee hearing.

At least six in-state agencies already provide animal-assisted therapy to children, according to testimony by Kate Nicoll, the founder of Soul Friends, an animal-assisted therapy nonprofit in Connecticut. Nicoll said the group had eight mental health clinicians who use animals to serve youths, many through programs housed under the state's Department of Children and Families.

The law only pertains to crisis situations, but future legislation might identify other contexts where state-sponsored animal-assisted therapy might be appropriate. Some states allow specially trained dogs to stand with court witnesses because the dogs can detect stress and make a trauma victim feel safer.

"I don't think that this necessarily needs to be reserved for the most traumatic or horrific events," said state Sen. Dante Bartolomeo, one of the bill's primary sponsors. "It could be a huge benefit to children who are having trauma within their home." Bartolomeo said she may introduce a bill in a future session to incorporate dogs as part of school counseling programs.

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