

Cedar Creek inmates help train service dogs for war veterans

JEREMY PAWLOSKI | Staff writer • Published May 02, 2012

A group of inmates at Cedar Creek Corrections Center have been called to duty training service dogs to help returning Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans cope with their injuries – including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

The 10 participating inmates at the minimum-security prison in Capitol Forest say they appreciate the companionship. When they're not teaching the dogs basic obedience, they live with them in their cells. They also said they have a sense of pride knowing their hard work will help a veteran as he or she transitions back to life stateside.

"I have a lot of respect for the military personally for what they do for our country," said Thurman Sherrill, 45, serving time for convictions for first-degree assault and unlawful possession of a firearm out of Pierce County.

Sherrill and his secondary trainer, inmate Don Glaude, have been assigned a black Labrador named Bodie.

Added Michael Perry, a 66-year-old inmate serving a prison sentence for second-degree robbery out of Pierce County: "I get a lot of self-satisfaction helping these dogs and knowing that they're going to go to a veteran. It's pretty rewarding."

Perry and his secondary trainer, inmate Jack Sebade, 76, have been assigned an 11-month-old black Labrador named Trapper. Perry, who is scheduled for release in May 2014, said he'll probably have the dog for a year, at least, before Trapper completes his training.

The program was made possible by a partnership among the Bellingham-based Brigadoon Service Dogs, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs and the state Department of Corrections.

Denise Costanden, founder and executive director of Brigadoon Service Dogs, comes to Cedar Creek once a week to supervise and monitor the inmates as they train the dogs. Even with the inmates' assistance, it costs roughly \$20,000 to train each dog before it is placed with a returning veteran, she said.

Service dogs are donated to each qualifying veteran, Costanden said. But there are waiting lists at both the Warrior Transition Battalion at Joint Base Lewis-McChord and the Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic at Madigan Army Medical Center. Those are just two of the destinations for Brigadoon's graduating service dogs, said Washington Department of Veterans Affairs program manager Donald Lachman.

Costanden said that her goal is to graduate 10 trained service dogs from Cedar Creek each year.

"I would not be able to get out as many dogs for the veterans without this program, absolutely," Costanden said. "There's not enough dogs to go around."

Lachman said each service dog is trained to serve an individual veteran's needs and injuries. For example, a veteran with PTSD who is afraid to enter his or her home might be placed with a service dog trained to alert the owner when other people are in a room. Other service dogs can be trained to open cabinets or pick up dropped items for an injured veteran, he said. Service dogs also can simply help a veteran with a traumatic brain injury keep his or her balance while standing, Lachman added.

"Veterans tell me they cannot live without these dogs," he said.

Costanden added that the dogs help veterans suffering from PTSD with general anxiety and fear of public places. A veteran suffering from PTSD might also have a service dog trained to wake him or her from nightmares, she said.

"They like to have the dogs watch their backs," she said.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has placed about 30 dogs with returning veterans so far, Lachman added. The program at Cedar Creek began two months ago.

Costanden said the inmates are teaching the dogs basic obedience because to serve the veterans, the dogs must be trained to lie down on demand, walk on a loose leash and not greet other dogs or people in public places.

"It's like building a house," she said of the training. "If you don't have a good foundation, you can't get the roof."

The inmates are screened for suitability to train dogs and must have no behavioral infractions, Cedar Creek Superintendent Douglas Cole said. There is an educational component for the inmates, he added.

"Animals give unconditional love, and a lot of the offenders have never seen that," Cole said. "It brings a sense of success and gratification."

Matthew Romero, a Thurston County offender serving a sentence for first-degree possession of stolen property and theft, said he appreciates that element of interacting with the dogs, as well as being able to help veterans. He also said he loves the service dog he has been assigned to train, Bella, a Pointer and hound-dog mix.

"Being in a hostile environment, it makes it easier coming home to a friendly and loving dog," he said.

Cedar Creek Corrections Officer Paris Albertson, who is assigned to watch over the inmates while they train the dogs, said he has noticed a marked difference in the offenders since the training began. He added that he was recently surprised to see one of the offenders, whom he considers a "hard" inmate, cooing and fussing over his service dog.

"Just the overall change in temperature in the unit," Albertson said. "They're calmer. It's a huge benefit."

Jeremy Pawloski: 360-754-5445

jpawloski@theolympian.com

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2012/05/02/2090733/cedar-creek-inmates-help-train.html#storylink=cpy>