



Need weather on the go? KHQ has you covered.

Download the KHQ Weather Authority App.

[Click to learn more and download.](#)



f Recommend 664 9

Pairing Prisoners With Puppies: A Look Inside Spokane's Pawsitive Dogs Program

Posted: Jan 08, 2014 4:42 PM PST

Updated: Jan 08, 2014 7:19 PM PST

by Kelsey Watts, KHQ Local News Anchor/Reporter - [bio](#) | [email](#)



AIRWAY HEIGHTS, Wash. - If you drive by the Airway Heights Corrections Center you'll see a compound wrapped in barbed wire, surrounding by tall walls and bright lights, filled with hardened criminals.

But there's a softer side to the prison, one that's changing lives – both the two-legged and four-legged kind.



Through a SpokAnimal program called "Pawsitive Dogs," inmates are paired with rescued dogs to train them for their forever homes. The inmates must apply, qualify and demonstrate good behavior. They take classes every week on how to train the animals, body language and verbal commands.

"When we bring the dogs in on the first week for the first meeting, there's hesitation on both ends of the leash," said Kim Imel, the lead instructor and program coordinator.

But then, the bonding begins. And it happens fast.

"He's our baby, our little baby doggie," inmate and dog handler Philip Romero told KHQ's Kelsey Watts.

Romero and his cellmate, Jeff Nelson, were in the middle of training Sonny, a stray that was found in very bad shape, when we visited the prison.

"He had a huge matted coat, almost matted to the skin, and we weren't sure what we were going to find under that," Imel added.

The inmates keep each dog around the clock for 8-10 weeks before the dog is adopted out. Between cycles they take a few weeks off to heal from the emotional loss and prepare for the next dog.

"I miss them all," Romero said of Jasper and Annie, the other dogs he and Nelson trained together.

"When Annie left, I was down for three days, just stayed on my bunk."

But the men aren't the only ones doing the teaching.

"Patience, love, Sonny shows a lot of kindness and happiness," Nelson told KHQ's Kelsey Watts.

Sonny and his trainers have a lot in common: both are looking for redemption, both are looking for a new beginning.

You could say it's a new leash on life – for Sonny and the inmates.

There are roughly two-dozen dog handlers serving their sentences at Airway Heights Corrections Center. For more information, visit: <https://www.facebook.com/PawsitiveDogPrisonProgram>

From <http://www.khq.com/story/24400577/pairing-prisoners-with-puppies-a-look-inside-spokanes-pawsitive-dogs-program>