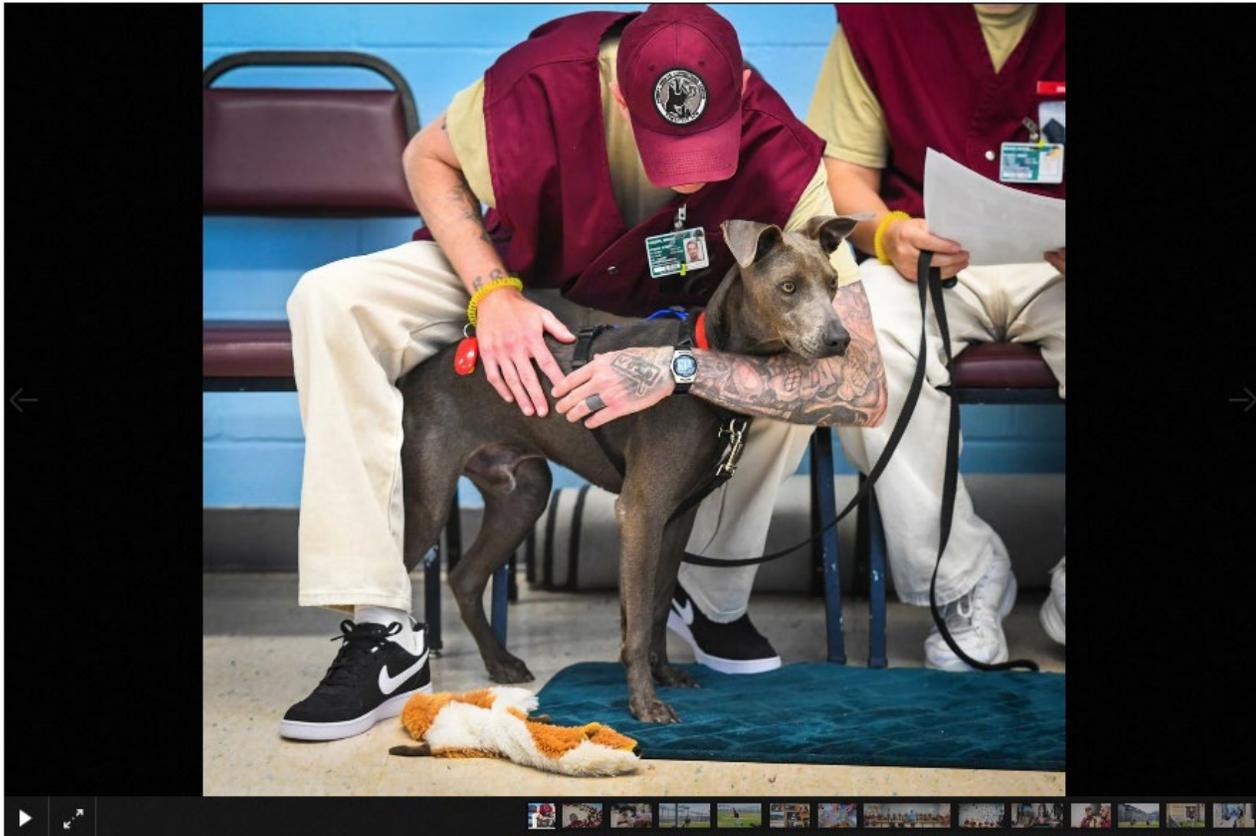




NEWS > SPOKANE

Inmates are training dogs at Airway Heights prison and helping themselves along the way

Sat., Aug. 4, 2018, 4 a.m.



Airway Heights Corrections Center inmate dog handler Josh Phillips embraces his dog Lincoln during a Pawsitive Dog program training session, Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2018. The one-year-old Weimaraner mix is from the Spokane Humane Society. (Dan Pelle / The Spokesman-Review)

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Josh Phillips playfully rubbed his 1-year-old Weimaraner's belly as he explained to the trainer how, very recently, Lincoln was hesitant to enter a staircase.

"There's so much to talk about Lincoln," the 32-year-old handler said of his playful pup. "He's smart. And he's quick."

If not for a set of security cameras watching from above and an armed security guard seated a few feet away, Phillips, with a full left-arm tattoo sleeve and platinum blond hair that he wears high and tight, could be just another dog owner.

But he's not. He's one of about 21 inmate dog handlers in Airway Heights Corrections Center's Pawsitive Dog program — one of several across the state's prison system, the first of which began in 1981 at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor.

Every few weeks, Phillips and others get a new rescue dog from an area animal shelter. And then for up to three months, they potty-train them and coach them how to sit, play and, most important, tease out the remnants of a harsh life and replace them with praise and positive reinforcement.

More photos available at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/aug/04/inmates-are-training-dogs-at-airway-heights-prison/>



Inmate dog handlers at Airway Heights Corrections Center gather for a Pawsitive Dog program training session with their Spokane Humane Society dogs, Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2018. (Dan Pelle / The Spokesman-Review)

“Every dog I’ve been with has been adopted by someone,” said a prideful Phillips, who is likely never to leave a prison in his lifetime after being sentenced under the three strikes law. “But it’s hard. I roll over in that first night the dog’s gone and want to say something to that dog. But she’s not there. I roll back over and cry my little tears.”

At Airway Heights, for the six years it’s been around, the program appears to have earned its namesake. James Key, the superintendent, said with each batch of new dogs, it’s an easy “win-win for everyone.”

“We see change in behavior, for sure,” he said of the inmates. “It brings the population together.”

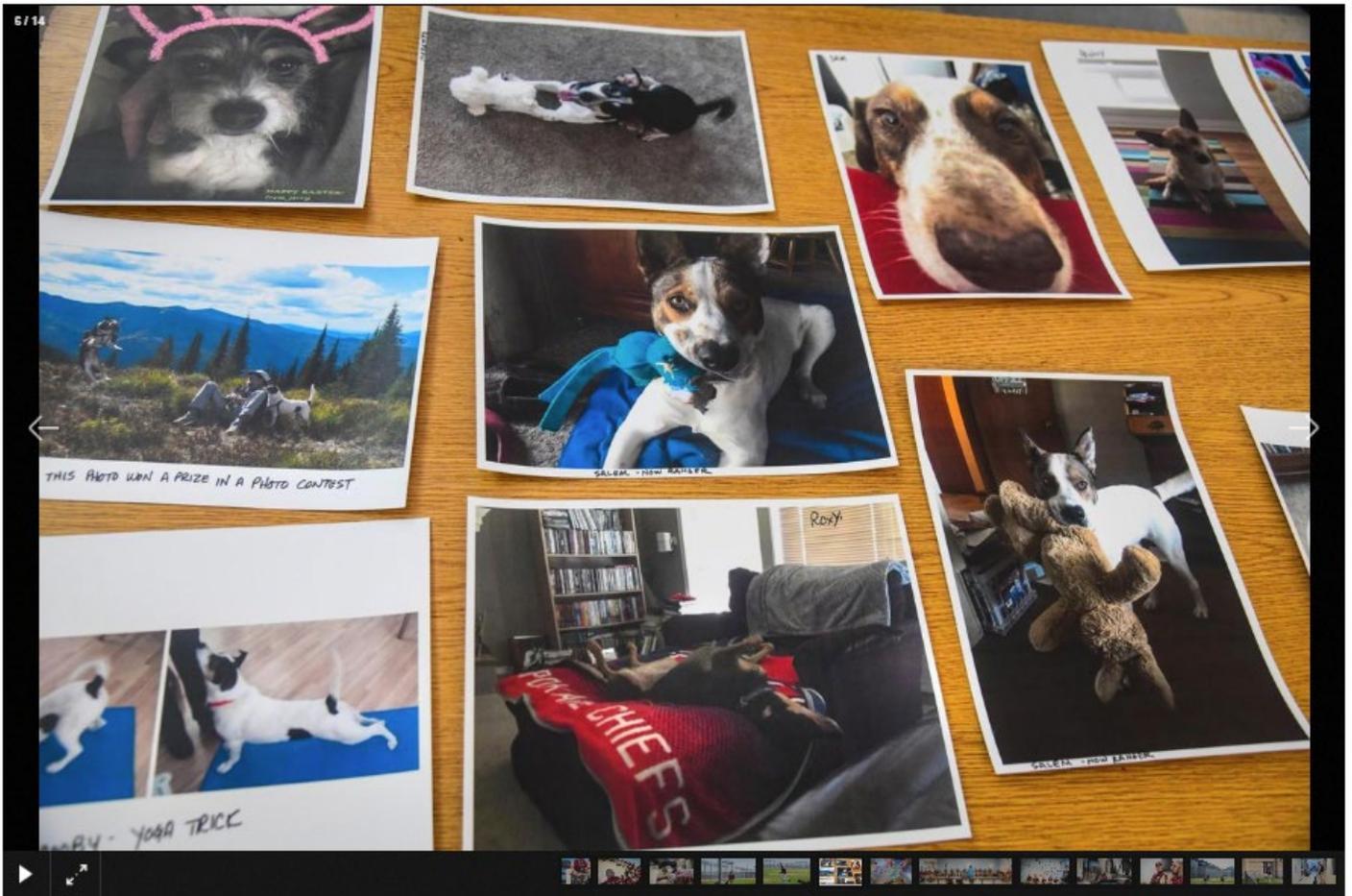
Research suggests Key is correct. According to a 2017 study published in *The Prison Journal* by Jacqueline van Wormer, an assistant professor at Whitworth University, researchers found that prisons with dog training programs achieved a higher level of accountability, saw a “statistically significant” decrease in infractions among inmates, and had a safer and healthier prison environment than those without.

The study notes, however, that participants who apply for the program are more likely to be lower-risk offenders in the first place. And it didn’t study recidivism rates once an inmate leaves prison. But van Wormer writes that there are clear benefits to the prison population.

“Given the positive indicators (prison-based animal programs) have had on intermediate outcomes related to violence and antisocial behavior, it is hard to argue against the success achieved,” the study reads.

Airway Heights boasts that 143 dogs have been trained so far, with another eight due to graduate in a few weeks. When the time comes, they’ll walk back through the large metal doors changed canines.

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Pictures of animals that have graduated the Pawsitive Paw dog training program are displayed during a current training session at the Airway Heights Corrections Center, Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2018. (Dan Pelle / The Spokesman-Review)

From there, it's either back to the Spokane Humane Society and the adoption floor or, and much more likely, into the eager arms of an owner – prison staff included – who's already picked out the prison pup and is waiting patiently at the main entrance for the leash.

"Sometimes there's a bidding war," said Ben Frier, the program's director.

Carol Byrnes, owner of Diamonds in the Ruff dog training facility, which makes a free trek to Airway Heights every two weeks to check in, said she never imagined operating inside a prison. But six years later, it's a highlight of her career.

"I love it," she said. "It was a little freaky at first, but now I look forward to it every week."

On Wednesday, Byrnes and one of her trainers led a class for the group of handlers and the eight dogs who'd gotten to the prison just two weeks ago from San Antonio. They were rescued from a shelter's version of death row.

The session began in the prison's main visiting area under the backdrop of drawings by children hung on the wall. One by one, the handlers shared what they worked on that week. Their pups sat patiently on mats, gnawing at a bone or snacking on a treat.

Many of the handlers have been doing it for years, and it's a coveted position among the general prison population. The pay is meager compared to other jobs, and the application process is rigorous. It includes a screening to make sure they've had no convictions for animal abuse, no serious offenses in the past six months and are following all prison procedures.

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Then there's the 24-hour-a-day commitment. The dogs sleep in their cells on a mat. And when inmates go to chow, they're right there with them. At recreation time, they're on the other end of the leash.

At each turn, each moment and interaction, a training opportunity. Since the dogs often have past traumas, it's double the work getting them to understand what most dogs take for granted: When humans pick up a sleeping mat, it doesn't mean it's going to be thrown at their head. And a staircase isn't only a place to get kicked down.

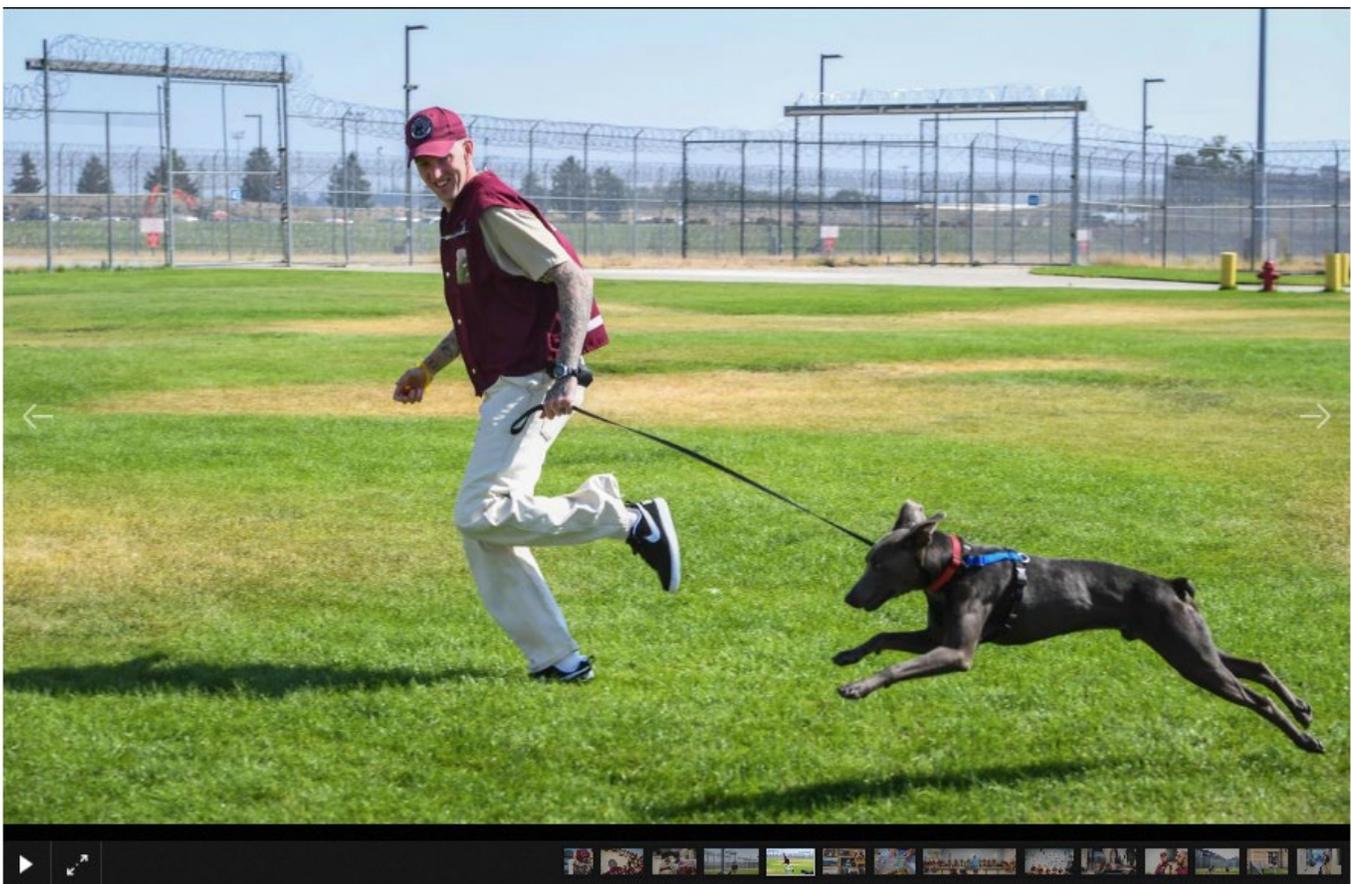
Then for the inmate, there's the inescapable heartache that comes at the end of each 10-week session. The dog goes. The inmate stays.

"It's tough," Phillips said. "You can have moments with that dog that you can't have with anyone else. You can show actual emotion."

Brad Self, a deeply introspective man with thick-rimmed glasses and a full, brown beard, is known around the circle as the "nerdy know-it-all" when it comes to psychology and methodology of dog training.

Despite being an inmate, he said the methods Diamonds in the Ruff and the inmates use don't rely at all on punitive behavior, and instead focus on praise and reinforcement.

"I really like that we don't use punishment," he said. "The dog's personality really gets to shine."



Airway Heights Corrections Center inmate dog handler Josh Phillips is called back inside with his dog Lincoln after exercise time in the dog yard, Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2018. The pair are participating in the Pawsitive Dog prison dog training program. (Dan Pelle / The Spokesman-Review)

Self has been training for four years, and with another 18 years left on his sentence after a Spokane County jury found him guilty in 2009 of armed robbery and assault, he suspects he'll continue until he's released at the age of 54. And yes, he will get a dog when he's out.

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But until that day, the little respite he has from a life inside walls of concrete comes from the few minutes a day he spends throwing a ball in an open green field and having his furry friend retrieve it for him. The high fence and rows of barbed wire hardly have room in this picture.

“I can put all the rest behind me and just be out there with my dog,” he said. “I could be out at a park.”



Kim Imel, of Diamonds in the Ruff, center, works with the inmate dog handlers in the Pawsitive Dog prison dog training program, Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2018, at the Airway Heights Corrections Center. D (Dan Pelle / The Spokesman-Review)