

# Courthouse Facility Dogs Give Strength to Crime Victims

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**When children are physically or sexually abused, the criminal justice system requires them to endure additional trauma to ensure that justice is served. Victims must undergo forensic interviews and medical exams and may have to tell their stories in court.**

**Having to testify is very difficult for children, says Celeste Walsen, DVM, executive director of the [Courthouse Dogs Foundation](#). “We have a child psychologist on our advisory board who tells us, ‘To have [children] come into a room where everybody’s looking at them, and somebody’s sitting up above them with a big, black robe, and they know that someone is going to try and make it look like they’re lying—if you had to design something to make children not talk, you couldn’t do better.’”**

**To give children emotional support during investigations and criminal trials, some government agencies and nonprofit organizations in the United States, Canada, and Chile rely on specially trained animals called courthouse facility dogs.**

**While they’re most often used to help children, facility dogs provide comfort to victims and witness of all ages in many stressful situations: forensic interviews, medical exams, interviews by defense attorneys, and court cases involving victims of child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault. They’re also used in drug court, family court, and veterans court.**

Across the U.S., 127 of these dogs—mostly Labrador and Golden Retrievers—play this important role, and their presence in the courtroom has been protected in six states. Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, and Oklahoma **have passed laws** allowing dogs to accompany certain types of victims and witnesses during their court testimony. Depending on the state, the legislation specifies either facility dogs or therapy dogs.

This distinction is important because facility dogs are not therapy animals, says Walsen, whose organization offers training opportunities for professionals and helps agencies develop best practices for courthouse facility dog programs.



Before the dogs can be placed with a designated handler in the legal field, such as a detective or victim advocate, they undergo two years of rigorous training at a service dog school with membership in Assistance Dogs International. Fewer than half of the dogs graduate, and those who do must have an extremely calm, laid-back temperament.

Once they're on the job, facility dogs can soothe crime victims simply by sitting or lying down next to them on the witness stand. When that's not permitted, they can lie down next to their handler in view of the witness. The dogs are typically placed

out of sight in the courtroom, and when a judge informs the jury that a dog is present, he or she instructs the jurors to not let the animal's presence affect their decisions.

No matter where they are in the courtroom, the dogs have a big impact on a victim's state of mind. "It gives them that comfort, and it changes them so that they're able to stay calm and keep telling their side of the story," says Walsen.

One facility dog who's been providing this support to crime victims since 2013 is Blake, a five-year-old black Lab trained by Assistance Dogs of the West. His handler is Colleen Phelan, a victim advocate at the Pima County Attorney's Office in Tucson, Arizona.

Blake started working as a facility dog soon after the office received its first placement, a Golden Retriever named Russell. Not long after Russell's arrival, the staff recognized the need for a second dog to share the workload, and today both dogs are cross-trained to work in the courtroom and at a local child advocacy center.

Blake and Russell have made a significant difference in victims' experiences within the court system. "What they're able to do is be a presence that doesn't ask anything," says Phelan. "[In] my job as an advocate, I will ask you to interact with me, I will ask you to talk to me and share with me, and those are all good and important things I do—but what Blake asks for is, you know, maybe some belly rubs. You don't have to talk, you can just share space with him, and that's really positive and very healing."

Blake also lends a paw in cases with adult victims, including one involving the sexual assault of a woman with a serious mental illness. The trial was extremely traumatic for her—she had panic attacks every time she came to the district attorney's office—and when the defendant appealed his conviction, the attorney on the case asked the woman whether she'd testify again if required.

Before meeting with her to discuss the possibility, the lawyer asked Phelan to bring Blake. The woman petted him as they sat on the floor together, and eventually she agreed to testify again if needed.

"On the way home, she told the investigator, 'Well, I know I can [testify] because Blake told me that I'd be OK,' and so for her it literally made the difference between her being able to do it and not," says Phelan. "This is somebody who is unable to work and moves through the world in a very difficult way every day, and so for her, his presence changed the whole idea of coming in."

**Crime victims aren't the only ones who get a boost from facility dogs. "Self-care is difficult in this work, and Blake provides this very healthy touch and this silliness and love that everybody adores," says Phelan. "One of the not-often-mentioned benefits is that the staff get this huge benefit from having the dogs around."**

**Several hundred miles away in northern California, a three-year-old yellow Lab named JoJo works alongside Mary Pickett, an investigator with the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office. JoJo was trained by Canine Companions for Independence and began working as a facility dog in 2015.**

**Pickett's favorite JoJo story involves a young girl who had been victimized by her mother and stepfather and had to testify against both of them in court. After she'd been on the stand for a total of six hours, she was left by herself in a room for a few minutes. When Pickett came back, she saw that the girl had drawn JoJo's face on the whiteboard and had written underneath, "I love JoJo. She is a cute dog!"**

**When JoJo isn't working, she hangs out on her big dog bed under Pickett's desk—most of the time, that is. "She doesn't wander," says Pickett, "except I feed her her evening meal here at work and she lets everybody know it's dinnertime. She'll go around looking for me or putting her head on people's laps."**

**Like other facility dogs, JoJo lives with her handler, and Pickett says they're rarely apart. "I take her everywhere with me," she says, remarking that she's "just a normal dog" who enjoys playing chase with Pickett's cat and running around the yard with other dogs.**

**After hearing stories about how JoJo and Blake help crime victims, it's hard to see either of them simply as "normal dogs." "The criminal justice system . . . is about defendants in so many ways, and their choices, and Blake . . . makes it about the victim," says Phelan. "He's there for them, and that's it, and that is so important when we're asking people to give a piece of themselves to us so that we can hold this person accountable. Blake kind of gives them that back."**