



Agency of Human Services
State of Vermont
Department of Corrections

To: Corrections Oversight Committee

From: Andrew Pallito, Commissioner, Department of Corrections

Subject: Report on ACT 201Section 3: COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTIONS; CARE OF ANIMALS

Act 201 instructs the Commissioner of Corrections to examine the feasibility of beginning an animal training or adoption program in Vermont and, specifically, a program that would permit qualified offenders to care for animals that have been relinquished or seized pursuant to a cruelty or neglect investigation. The Commissioner shall consider similar programs in other states and consult with local humane organizations in determining what type of program would be appropriate for Vermont and which facilities would be most appropriate to sponsor such a program. The Commissioner shall report his or her recommendations to the Joint Committee on Corrections Oversight on or before November 1, 2014.

The Department is currently working with the Blue Star Mothers of Vermont to address the needs of returning Veterans. This program matches a dog with an offender for a 12 month program that trains the animal to assist a veteran with special needs. Two dogs will be placed in the Springfield facility over the winter. Prior to placement in the facility, an animal spends 6-8 months with a community volunteer to receive basic behavior training. Once that period ends, the animal is placed with an offender who has been screened and trained to provide the specialized training. Dog trainers provide the offender with initial training and provide on-going training once the dog is placed inside the facility. Blue Star Mothers of Vermont has already identified an additional three dogs for placement.

Additionally, the CCA run facility in Beattyville, KY has a canine program that takes animals designated as hard to adopt from a local shelter. These animals live with an offender in their cell in the designated "Dog Unit" at the facility. The animal spends 12 weeks with the offender handler and then returns to shelter to be adopted out. This program also requires significant training of offenders and a special screening process to hire the offender for this job. We are examining the operation of this program to assess if it can be replicated in a Vermont facility.

At this point, the Department plans to move forward with the program that trains dogs for Veterans. The program will be monitored to understand all the issues related to the introduction of dogs at facility. At this time we do not recommend establishing a program in the Department to care for animals that have been seized or relinquished pursuant to a cruelty or neglect investigation.

Vermont Prison Pups

In a recent issue of *4 Legs & a Tail*, we shared the story of Lt. Melissa Stockwell. She was the first officer wounded in Afghanistan. Upon her return stateside, she was teamed up with a service dog, trained by an inmate in one of the many prison-based "puppy raiser" programs here in the US, to help with the new challenges she faces as a civilian.

"A veteran is someone who, at one point, wrote a blank check, made payable to 'The United States of America' for an amount 'up to and including their life!'" ~ Author Unknown

With many of our family and friends returning from a long war, the Vermont Department of Corrections will be addressing the needs of our veterans, thanks to the efforts of the Blue Star Mothers of Vermont. According to program coordinator Terri Sabens, inmates at the Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield, VT will begin training service dogs this winter, to assist returning military personnel. As a former volunteer with Soldiers Angels, Sabens spent more than a year reaching out to the Vermont Dept. of Corrections. "PTSD is a widespread issue that many of our veterans face. There were just too many related suicides that can't be ignored."

This fall, Mazie (the first of two dogs to be trained at the facility) visited the facility for the first time. A second dog, Beetle Bailey, will join the team in February to begin a 12 month training program specifically designed for assisting a vet with



Mazie

special needs, including turning lights on and off and waking them up during a nightmare. Dog trainers, including Sabens, Wanda Chapman and Jim Daignault will teach inmates the proper techniques, and supervise the on-going training at the prison.

Tara Clarke, Living Unit Supervisor at SSCF and a dog lover, is thrilled to see the program implemented at the Vermont facility. "I have a stack of appli-

cations from inmates so far, and as word spreads I'm sure there will be more," said Clarke. Each inmate will be screened extensively by both corrections officials and trainers, with each dog spending Monday through Friday with the inmate/trainer. "I think we're the perfect facility for this program. We even have a large, open yard that the dogs will love."

As a detailed training program begins to take shape before Mazie and Beetle Bailey arrive, it is important to note that this program is funded privately. Each dog can cost up to \$5,000 which includes vet bills, food,



Beetle Bailey

training and the purchase of the dog itself. So far, the Blue Star Mothers of VT has raised a few thousand dollars for this specific program, with a goal of another \$6,000. In addition to financial contributions, the Vermont based non-profit group is also looking for volunteers/donations, including: a veterinarian, Lamb Kibble dog food, weekend fosters for Mazie and Beetle Bailey, trainers and a grant writer. Terri Sabens says it best, "It's Paw-some!" 🐾

For more information or to help, visit www.BlueStarMothersofVermont.org

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