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Dog Therapy Day at NWCCC

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Honors Project

Dog Therapy Day at Northwest Community Corrections Center

I. INTRODUCTION

The past semester I spent my time researching animal-assisted therapy (AAT) in the prison systems. Animal-assisted therapy is a type of therapy intervention that involves the use of animals for therapeutic benefits. This specific type of therapy was first used for individuals with mental health issues, and has since branched into other populations such as the prison population (Britton & Button, 2005). AAT programs have been on the rise throughout American prisons because of their great benefits for the inmates as well as the surrounding communities (Strimple, 2003). These programs allow eligible inmates to house dogs in their perspective cells for a specified length of time. The inmates are then held responsible for caring for the dogs throughout their stay in the prison. They are also responsible for attending classes and training the dogs. At the end of the program term, the dogs are then given to community members as assistance dogs to those in need. AAT programs in institutions like these allow prisoners to increase their self-worth, gain responsibility skills, and they also help meet needs of the community (Bachi, 2013).

I chose to study this specific population because I am a Criminal Justice and Social Work student at Bowling Green State University. I also work at Northwest Community Corrections Center (NWCCC) as a Residential Specialist. I took on these degrees and my job position because I wish to be able to help bring a sense of hope to the individuals in prisons and correctional institutions. Based on my research last semester, I believe AAT programs are an effective resource to help me obtain that goal. While researching this therapeutic intervention, I began to ponder what I could do to implement this new knowledge I gained. I searched for ways I could bring this insight to the residents of NWCCC and allow them to experience similar therapeutic benefits from animals. The results came as creating and hosting an animal-therapy event day at the correctional facility. This would allow me to implement my research findings and allow the

residents to experience the proven benefits from interacting with animals.

II. METHODOLOGY

For my Honors Project, I wanted to be able to bring the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted therapy into the correctional facility that I currently work at. Therefore, I created, planned and implemented “Dog-Therapy Day.” My idea of this animal therapy event day was simply to allow residents of NWCCC to interact with animals for a portion of their day. I wished to have the maximum number of residents possible interact with an animal for approximately 20 minutes. This way, they would be able to receive the therapeutic benefits from human-animal interaction that I had studied last semester.

In order to make this happen, there were many steps I needed to take. First, I spoke with the Program Administrator, Charlie Hughes, and Operations Director, Brandon Will, from Northwest Community Corrections Center about my initial idea. Both individuals favored the idea and agreed to work with me to create the event for the residents. Next, I focused on finding animals for the residents to interact with. I had already known about Project H.O.P.E. Farm in Bowling Green, Ohio, so I chose this agency as the first agency contact point. This equine therapy farm is run by Sandra Tebbe, whom I have known through previous volunteer experience. Originally, my intention was to have the residents transported to this farm to interact with the horses. Mrs. Tebbe had agreed to hosting this event day, however when this semester began in August of 2017, she became very busy with clients and could not allot time for my idea any longer. So, I faced a challenge of trying to find a new place with animals to use.

When I found this news out, I began searching for other places to contact about hosting the animal therapy day. I spoke with NWCCC’s Community Outsource Manager, Jacob Bowman, who pointed me to the Wood County Dog Shelter. He suggested I ask this facility because NWCCC already has reputable contact with them. I contacted the Chief Dog Warden, Andrew Snyder, on September 19, 2017 and spoke with him about my project idea. Chief Snyder thought highly of the idea and agreed to host the event day. After speaking with Mr. Will from NWCCC about potential dates and times for the event, I talked to Chief Snyder. We decided that Saturdays would work best for both facilities. There was a strict time restraint on the event day due to the

dog shelter only being open from 9:00 AM until 12:00 PM on Saturdays. However, we still came to an agreement for Saturday, October 7, 2017 from 9:00 AM until 11:30 AM as the official event day date. I then named it “Dog-Therapy Day” since they would be interacting with dogs.

Next, I spoke with Mr. Bowman about the eligibility of the residents to participate. I faced challenges remaining within the correctional facility policy when creating a list of eligible residents. For example, the facility policy holds that no resident is allowed to leave the gated property boundaries until they have been in the program for thirty-one days. Due to legal constraints of the facility, I would only be able to take a group of five residents at a time to the dog shelter. The time restraint of the dog shelter also put a barrier on the amount of residents that would be able to participate in this event day. Therefore, the total number of residents that could participate was twenty-five: five groups of five residents, all spending approximately twenty minutes with the dogs at the dog shelter.

While remaining within the facility policies and respecting the time restraint of the dog shelter, Mr. Bowman and I worked together to create a list of residents eligible to participate in the “Dog-Therapy Day” event. This list depended on their intake date, so the list contained more than the twenty-five available spots I had for participation in the animal-therapy day. After making this inclusive list, I knew I would have ask residents individual for their willingness to participate. Mr. Bowman also suggested that I talk to residents individually and take time to explain the event to each of them. This way they understood that their participation in the event would not affect their program at the correctional facility in any way, shape, or form, nor would their rejection of participation affect their program.

After discussing this with Mr. Bowman, I used a website called “Random.org” to generate a randomized numerical list in which the residents would be chosen to participate for the event day. This was to keep any bias out of the creation and implementation of the participation for event. After generating a completely randomized list of residents eligible to participate, I spoke individually with each resident in their order on the list. I explained to each resident what the event day was for and why I wished to create this animal-therapy event day. Following the explanation of the event, I asked each resident if they would like to participate or not. If they

agreed, I highlighted their name; if they did not want to participate, I crossed their name off the list. When twenty-five residents agreed to participate in “Dog-Therapy Day,” I stopped asking residents for their participation. I then explained to those on the list I did not ask the restraints I faced when creating this event day and why I was only able to take twenty-five residents and not all of the eligible individuals.

When I had a list of twenty-five residents willing to participate, I created a schedule for the event day. I split the day up into five different half-hour time slots in which each group of five residents would go to the dog shelter. For example, the first group would be there from approximately 9:00 AM -9:30 AM. The second group would be at the shelter from about 9:30 AM – 10:00 AM, and so on until 11:30 AM.

I showed this finalized list of residents to Mr. Bowman, Mr. Will, and Chief Snyder so that all were informed of whom would be participating in “Dog-Therapy Day.” All men approved this list. I spoke with Mr. Will regarding liability concerns I had with transporting the residents as well as with them interacting with dogs. Mr. Will assured me that, since I was an employee of the facility, I would be covered by facility insurance for transportation if I clocked-in the day of the event. He also assured me that every resident signed a liability waiver form upon their intake of the facility in which the facility is not held liable for any injuries relating to interactions with dogs at the Wood County Dog Shelter. With all of these liabilities covered, we awaited the date of the event.

On October 7, 2017, I arrived at the facility, clocked-in, and called the first group of residents out to the facility van. I transported the first five residents to the dog shelter. Upon arrival at the facility, the on-duty dog warden showed them to the dogs and showed them how to put the collars and leashes on the dogs. When they had the collars and leashes on the dogs, the warden led the residents outside and explained to them their area boundaries. After this, the residents were free to spend their allotted time with the dog they were paired with however they chose to. The residents could walk the dogs, play with them, run with them, sit with them, or whatever they chose to do within reason. When the allotted time was up, I informed the residents it was time to put the dogs away. They walked the dogs inside, put them in their perspective cages, and

I drove the residents back to NWCCC.

I completed this same process for the final four groups of residents. Each time I would drive the next group of residents to the dog shelter, teach them how to put the collars and leashes on the dogs, and then allow them to spend their time with the dogs however they chose. At the end of their session, I would inform the residents it was time to leave, and they would put the dogs away so we could drive back to the correctional facility. At approximately 11:30 AM, when all five groups of residents had gotten to spend time with the dogs, the “Dog Therapy Day” event concluded. I clocked-out of the facility and thanked the residents for participating.

III. FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

The idea of hosting an animal-assisted therapy event was my goal of my Honors Project. However, when the project was completed, I reflected on the day of the event and recognized that this could be turned into a research study. I believe the use of this event day as a research study would be beneficial because it would further implicate the findings of my literature review. I would be able to create a study specifically designed and tailored to the residents at Northwest Community Corrections Center, which could then add to previous research.

If I were to turn this event day into a research study, I would focus on the effectiveness of dog-therapy on reducing residents’ stress levels. I would choose this to be my main topic of focus because, from working at the correctional facility, I know how much stress the residents feel throughout their days in the program. The typical day of a resident at NWCCC is filled with classes, homework, and expectations that they complete facility chores as well. This load of responsibilities adds stressors into the residents lives on top of the environmental factors they are dealing with outside of the facility. An example of these outside stressors would be family problems, such as a divorce, that a resident may be experiencing and dealing with outside of NWCCC. Therefore, I believe residents experience a great deal of stress while completing the program at the correctional facility.

Based on my previous literature review study, I believe that the interactions between the residents and the dogs would lessen the stress of the residents. This would be my hypothesis of the potential research study that I could create and implement. Previous studies that involved

animal-assisted therapy have shown a reduction in the amount of stress felt by research participants. The results of these studies have also shown a heightened mood in the participants after they had interactions with animals, including dogs. Therefore, I believe that the residents of NWCCC would experience the same emotional benefits as seen in previous research studies.

The methodology of the research study would need to be structured differently than it was for the “Dog Therapy Day” event I hosted. The structure would need to have a research design so that I am able to collect data from the event day. For example, I would include the creation of pre- and post- surveys. These surveys would include questions regarding their current levels of stress and current coping skills. It would allow them to rank their stress levels, and other emotions, on a Likert-scale. I believe this is an easy way to empower the residents to express their feelings. It would also allow me to be able to quantitatively measure their stress levels before and after interacting with the dogs. Another step I would add would be recording observations while the residents interacted with the dogs at the shelter. This would allow me to have qualitative data to analyze for further research results. These a few steps I would take to structure the event day into a research design.

Other steps I would need to take into consideration prior to conducting this research study is to gain approval of research boards. Since this research project would be involving human subjects, particularly individuals considered “vulnerable populations,” I would need to gain the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This administration is in charge of regulating and approving any research involving living individuals. Another institution I would need to seek approval from is the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). This administration oversees regulating and approving any research involving living animals. Since the research project would involve both individuals in the vulnerable population and live animals, I would need approval from both the IRB and the IACUC prior to conducting the research study.

The event day, after being approved by these research boards, would be structured slightly differently to incorporate and implement research designs. First, I would have them fill out the pre- survey individually before they leave the correctional facility. I would collect the surveys

and then transport them to the dog shelter. The next steps of the research project would be similar to those of the “Dog Therapy Day” I hosted. The one difference in these steps would be the recording of my observations. If I were to turn this event-day into a research study, I would record any observations I had while the residents were interacting with the dogs. This way, I would have more data that could be analyzed and used to draw a conclusion. After the residents were done interacting with the dogs, I would take them back to NWCCC and have them complete the post- survey individually. I would repeat this same process with the other groups of residents until the allotted time was over.

The next step in this research process would be to analyze the data. I would be able to compare each resident’s pre- and post- surveys to see the changes in their moods and stress levels. I would create a table to organize the data by moods and stress levels “worsened,” “no change,” and “improved.” Since the surveys would use the Liker-scales, there would be a direct measurement of whether or not their stress levels improved due to the interaction with the dogs. I would also analyze the qualitative results of my observations. Again, these would provide me with more data to support or deny my hypothesis. I would record my result analysis and formulate a conclusion for my hypothesis. These are the steps I would take to change the “Dog Therapy Day” event that I originally hosted into a research study.

I believe that turning my original “Dog Therapy Day” into a research study would be beneficial for the research community. I believe that this study would be helpful to provide more research on animal-assisted therapy in correctional institutions. Further implications of my event day could also lead to the creation of animal-assisted therapy programs within NWCCC. I believe that, if enough evidence was shown on the benefits of these types of programs, the correctional facility may consider adding an AAT program to their facility. This would be the ultimate goal if I were to turn this into a research study. I believe that there are many therapeutic benefits that the residents at NWCCC could receive if there was a program like this implemented there.

IV. REFERENCES

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