

James River Correctional Center inmates train dogs

[Toni Pirkle](#) The Jamestown Sun
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John M. Steiner / The Sun James River Correctional Center inmates, front, from left, Damien Breeding with Jingles, Chris Danielson with Ivy and Bowe Getzlaff with Jangles walk down the dorm hallway Friday demonstrating the dogs' training at the prison. In back, from left, are an unidentified handler of Jingles, and another unidentified handler and Kendall Feist, both working with Ivy. The Inmate Canine Assistance Program at the JRCC has been doing the basic training of service dogs for Great Plains Assistance Dogs Foundation for about a month.

Nine inmates at the James River Correctional Center have a new job — dog handling.

No, the inmates haven't suddenly been given the right to have pets in prison. This is important volunteer work, said Don Redmann, JRCC warden, something he's wanted for a number of years — helping to train service dogs.

Great Plains Assistance Foundation in Jud has 23 dogs in various stages of training and only two trainers in its Service Dogs for America program.

For Joni Brandenburg, Great Plains executive director and Mitch Doyle, head trainer, the lack of time to work with each dog has limited the number they can place with those who are physically challenged. They've been able to place only eight to 10 service dogs a year. What they needed were more trainers and more time spent on basic dog training.

They found their answer at the prison.

The one thing inmates have plenty of is time. With three handlers teaching and reinforcing what is called basic five training — sit, stay, heel, down and come — all involved hope the young dogs will get trained in these fundamentals faster and more thoroughly.

“They must obey on the first command,” Doyle said.

Only after it’s been trained well in the basics can a dog be trained to specific service needs. With only two trainers it took much longer to get through the basics, which meant specialized training to serve individual needs was also delayed.

“Our goal is to increase the number of service dogs placed each year,” Redmann said.

About a month ago, the nine inmates who were chosen as basic trainers started working with Ivy, Jangles and Jingles. Great Plains supplies all the food, equipment and veterinary services. The inmates, who were interviewed by Great Plains staff before getting the job, supply the labor and the time around their own schedules.

Doyle trained them in their work with the dogs and continues to meet with them regularly to provide more training. Friday she was at the prison for another session.

The dogs are with one of their three handlers at all times — 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Why three handlers?

“So the dog doesn’t become dependent on only one person,” Brandenburg said.

Although the logistics of having dogs in the prison could be worked out, Redmann was a little worried about how the rest of the inmates would react to having them around. Would the dogs be safe? The answer was a resounding yes.

“The inmates behaved like little kids with the dogs,” he said. “The dogs were very well received.”

“When you bring the dog into a room, the atmosphere changes in a positive way,” said inmate Adrian Spath, one of Jingles’ handlers.

As a side benefit, everyone at the prison is learning about dogs and how to treat them.

“It’s all positive reinforcement. They get ignored if they don’t do what you want them to do,” Redmann said. “And absolutely no people food.”

At the same time, no one knew how the dogs would react to prison life with its dense population in a confined area. So far, only one dog has washed out of the program.

“We started out with Hope, but she didn’t do well with a lot of people,” Spath said.

For Spath, Damien Breeding, Kendall Feist, Chris Danielson and Bowe Getzlaff, this volunteer work is ongoing enjoyment for a good cause.

“It’s pretty cool. They’ll help somebody wherever they go,” said Danielson, who is one of Ivy’s handlers.

Getzlaff, a Jangles’ handler, said it was rewarding. He spent a few minutes huddled with Doyle to discuss what to do about Jangles beginning to bark for no reason.

“It’s hard not to get attached to them because they’re so good. They behave way better than we do,” Getzlaff said. “They’re teaching us patience and responsibility.”

All the men laughingly agreed they were taking second place to the dogs now. They also agree it’s going to be tough to let their dogs go after six months.

“He’ll be going to someone who needs him,” Spath said. “I just tell myself it’s time for him to go to work.”

Doyle was happy with the progress the three dogs were making. Eventually, Doyle, Brandenburg and Redmann hope to have as many as 10 dogs getting their basic training at the prison.

“It’s a work in progress, but it’s gone way better than anyone thought,” said Chad Pringle, the JRCC staff member in charge of the Inmate Canine Assistance Program or ICAP. “We hear very few complaints from inmates. The dogs are something from the outside and they’re comforting.”

ICAP is also a service inmates are particularly suited to do.

“About 25 percent of the dogs will fail to become service dogs in the end,” Redmann said. “We’re hoping we can reduce that number with more attention and training here.”

Great Plains is a nonprofit 501(c) 3 organization. To learn more or donate to Service Dogs of American contact Brandenburg at 701-685-2242. More information is also available online at www.greatplainsdogs.com.

Sun reporter Toni Pirkl can be reached at (701) 952-8453 or by e-mail at tonip@jamestownsun.com