

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
48 JUDICIAL DISTRICT
COURT OF COMMON PLEAS**

**POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR
THERAPY DOG HANDLERS IN DEPENDENCY COURT
(Effective September 1, 2019)**

Overview & Purpose

Children and adults in dependency court are sometimes required to wait for extended periods of time before their court appearance, and this wait may produce high levels of anxiety for some – particularly children in vulnerable situations. Many studies show that the interaction with friendly animals provides both emotional and physical benefits.

On Wednesdays, the Court’s primary dependency hearing day, the Court will try to have dog therapy teams available to interact with children and adults waiting for their court hearings. The goal is to provide comfort and positive dog interaction in order to reduce anxiety before the court hearings begin and during the hearings.

Scope

Children as well as parents, custodians and other court participants are invited to interact with the dog therapy team(s) in a group setting while waiting for their case to be heard. Depending on scheduling availability, up to two teams may be present.

Dogs + Handlers = Dog Therapy Teams

Each handler and his/her dog are considered a dog therapy team. The teams are all volunteers affiliated with various local and national pet therapy organizations, including, but not limited to, Alliance of Therapy Dogs, Therapy Dogs International and Pet Partners. Membership in these pet therapy organizations includes liability insurance coverage for its pet therapy team members when volunteering within the community, and proof of membership and liability insurance is required in order to volunteer in Court.

These teams visit long-term care facilities, elementary schools, nursing homes, public libraries and courts to promote motivational, recreational and therapeutic benefits. All dogs and handlers have passed nationally recognized skills and aptitude tests and have been examined by a veterinarian to ensure good health.

All dog therapy teams must also comply with the following provisions:

- Our dog therapy teams are provided by CASA of McKean County. <https://casamckean.org/>.
- Identification of Handlers – All handlers and their dogs will be issued a county picture ID badge that identifies both the handler and his/her dog. This badge shall be worn whenever working as a dog therapy team in the Courthouse. Handlers should also wear court appropriate attire (no jeans) when attending Court. Dogs should wear the blue bandana provided by CASA.
- Leash – Dogs must be leashed at all times with the handler in control of the animal and leash.
- Animal Fatigue – Because therapy animals are subject to fatigue, particularly in stressful situations, it is suggested that teams “work” for a maximum of two hours; however, teams have the discretion to work longer if desired. Teams are also encouraged to take breaks or leave when necessary.
- Clean-Up – Handlers are responsible for the clean-up of accidental indoor animal eliminations. Handlers are also required to clean up outdoor eliminations using proper disposal methods.
- Liability – Each dog therapy team must have liability insurance coverage in the amount of \$1,000,000.00 and provide a copy of the insurance policy and proof of current membership in the underlying pet therapy organization to CASA on a yearly basis.

McKean County Courthouse Information

On Wednesdays, the Court’s primary dependency hearing day, the presiding juvenile judge, hearing officer and court administration have agreed to allow dog therapy

teams to be available to interact with children and adults waiting for Court outside of Courtroom 1. Dog therapy teams have the discretion to determine the most appropriate location for interacting with the court participants on the 2nd floor, which may include the public waiting areas, jury room, the child play room, or, at the judge's discretion, in Courtroom 1 or 2.

- Security – When entering the McKean County Courthouse, all handlers are required to enter through the public entrance and go through security. Handlers are reminded that the safety and security of all court participants is the primary responsibility of courthouse security and that they must follow all instructions given to them by courthouse security.
- Handlers are advised that glass bottles and metal cans are not permitted in the McKean County Courthouse. Handlers may bring dog treats or food/water for their dog.
- Parking – Handlers will be provided reserved parking which is to be used only when scheduled to attend Court for dog therapy.

Scheduling

CASA has agreed to assume the role of scheduling all volunteer dog therapy teams to attend Court. No more than two dog therapy teams should be scheduled to attend dependency court at a time. Additionally, the Court cannot guarantee that a specific dog therapy team will be available or assigned to attend dependency court on any given day.

Presence of Third Party

A dog therapy team is never to be alone with a child; a third party is required to be present at all times when dog therapy teams are interacting with a child. Teams are encouraged to visit with children in a group setting or public hallway or in the presence of another dog therapy team to ensure the presence of a third party.

Background Checks

All handlers are required to undergo background checks. These background checks are in addition to background checks performed by the pet therapy organizations that handlers are members of. The specific findings of the background checks are confidential, however, CASA will advise the handler if he/she is not approved to

participate in the Court's dog therapy program. The Court does not keep any background check records received or reviewed; the only records maintained by the Court are the records that the background checks were completed and whether the handler was approved.

Confidentiality Agreement

Handlers are required to maintain the confidentiality of all information, including but not limited to, information pertaining to children and their families, whether written or verbal, received through the scope of interacting with dependency court participants. All handlers are required to sign a confidentiality agreement that will be kept by CASA.

Approval of Teams

Once the proof of liability insurance, background checks and signed confidentiality agreements are received and approved by CASA, the applicant and his/her dog will be scheduled to meet with a current Dog Therapy volunteer to assess the applicant's aptitude in the dependency courtroom setting. If no concerns are raised the applicant will be approved to participate in the Dog Therapy Program.

Reporting Incidents

Handlers are responsible for reporting incidents involving dog therapy teams to CASA (814-568-2170) and Court Administration (814) 887-3323. Reportable incidents may include injuries to a person or animal; situations with a high potential that an injury could have occurred either to a person or an animal; even if no one was hurt at the time; situations with a perception of an accident or injury; and incidents resulting in damages to property. When in doubt, please report it.

Honorable John H. Pavlock, P.J.
Honorable Christopher G. Hauser, J.