

Paws With A Cause assistance dogs help those with disabilities regain independence

Molly Macleod

J-Ad Graphics News Services

Paws With A Cause, a non-profit organization based in Wayland, Mich., has made a name for itself in the service dog industry.

In 1979, Michael D. Sapp Sr. was delivering commercial paper to loading docks across the Grand Rapids area. He and his wife, Candye, befriended Marty Jansen and his wife, Dianne, through Sapp's delivery route. Though Sapp's 9-to-5 job was delivering paper, he trained dogs on the side, mostly for his own enjoyment. Jansen caught wind of this fact and approached Sapp on the loading docks one day. Jansen and his wife were both deaf and had just adopted a deaf child. With no other resources to help them at the time, the Jansens were left wondering how they would hear their young child's cries.

Paws With A Cause (PAWS) Director of Advancement Carrie Simmons recalled the story of her organization's founding, saying Jansen asked Sapp to train a dog to alert him and his wife to their child's cries. Sapp was reluctant at first, but with the help of his wife, he trained the very first PAWS dog: CRYSTAL, a Cairn Terrier. Though Sapp expected CRYSTAL's training to be a one-off, the Jansens showed up at the Sapp house one night with a crew of their friends. The Jansens were so impressed with CRYSTAL that many of their deaf and hard-of-hearing friends wanted Sapp to train dogs for them, too.

"Forty-four years later, we've placed over 3,200 assistance dogs," said Simmons. Since its foundation in 1979, PAWS has moved its headquarters from Grand Rapids, Mich. to Wayland. PAWS has also expanded from training only hearing assistance dogs to offering four different types of assistance dogs, along with facility dogs for schools or hospitals.

TYPES OF PAWS DOGS

The four types of assistance dogs PAWS offers today include general service, hearing and seizure response dogs in addition to dogs for children with autism.

Service dogs at PAWS are trained to help those living with physical disabilities of all kinds, offering assistance with day-to-day activities, while hearing dogs alert their owners to important sounds they wouldn't otherwise hear, such as an alarm clock or smoke detector.

"We have a client who was living independently but every time she dropped something, she didn't want to call her mom to come pick it up. So she would just wheel around things for a whole week ... and then her mom would come over on Saturday or Sunday and pick up all of her stuff," said Simmons. "She felt like she didn't want to burden her mom every single day to come over and get these things — so it really impeded her life. But now, she has her assistance dog, and he can pick (items) up for her immediately."

"It is pretty impactful," Simmons added.

Seizure response dogs are trained to alert help and offer comfort and assistance during a seizure. While these dogs are not trained to protect from, or alert people to, oncoming seizures, many of the dogs will pick up over time warning signs of an oncoming seizure in their owners.

"The last type of dog that we started training about 12 years ago is service dogs for children with autism. And that is a program that is pretty amazing," said Simmons. "Obviously, all of our dogs serve our clients with a disability, but these dogs in particular have a huge impact on the entire family."

PAWS dogs that work with children with autism help the children reduce their anxiety and improve socialization, among other things.

“Just yesterday, we had a mom here and her 10-year-old daughter has autism. It wasn’t until they received their PAWS dog that the mom finally got to sleep through the night after 10 years,” said Simmons.

Though PAWS is known across the country for their top-notch dogs and charitable work, all that success did not come without some growing pains.

“Early in the early days, Mike (Sapp) was rescuing dogs and trying to train them. He was only getting about a 1-in-12 success rate,” said Simmons.

Because PAWS could not always know if a rescue dog had temperament or physical issues before investing in their training, the organization switched to breeding their dogs in-house about 20 years ago.

THE PATH OF A PAWS PUPPY

All Paws With A Cause dogs are bred in-house at the Wayland headquarters, with “mama” and “papa” dogs fostered by families within a 45-minute drive of the organization’s home. PAWS uses four different breeds of dogs: Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, poodles and papillons.

After the puppies are born, they stay with their mother in her foster home until they are eight-weeks-old. After that, the puppies are brought to the PAWS headquarters for about a week to be vetted and checked over.

The next stop for PAWS puppies in training is to another foster home until they are 12- to 18-months-old, where foster owners will teach them basic obedience. Then, it is time for the adolescent dogs to return to the PAWS headquarters for more vetting and training.

After receiving their first round of formal assistance training, the dogs are then sent to one of five prisons in Michigan to live with, and be trained by, inmates for five months. Simmons describes this program as a “win, win, win” situation, because it benefits the dogs, the inmates and the prisons themselves.

“(The inmates) love it. They treat our dogs like you wouldn’t imagine. They are very well-loved and cared for in prison,” said Simmons.

Only non-violent offenders with zero incidents on their records are allowed to interact with the dogs. If an inmate working with the dog has any type of behavioral incident, they will immediately be barred from seeing the dog. This arrangement has resulted in entire wings of prisons with PAWS dogs showing improvements in behavior overall.

After completing their tour of foster homes, the PAWS dogs finally return to the Wayland headquarters one last time for final training. This training usually takes around four months.

“We have master-level trainers that have journeymanships through the U.S. Department of Labor that certifies them as assistance dog trainers,” said Simmons. “They’re teaching our dogs to open doors, turn on and off lights, push elevator buttons, pull the covers back over a client if the covers fall off the bed at night. You know, those kinds of tasks that are really high-level.”

From there, the dogs are placed with their clients, who must live within 90 miles of a trained field representative for PAWS, who will serve as a liaison between the client and Paws With A Cause to ensure a fruitful placement of the dog. PAWS dogs are sent all over the country, but most are placed in the organization’s home state of Michigan.

PAYING FOR PAWS

Simmons said raising one PAWS assistance dog costs about \$35,000 on average — and over two years of training. For a facilities dog, like those used in school counseling offices, it costs about \$26,000.

Despite the massive costs incurred for each dog by the organization, all PAWS dogs are provided to their clients at no cost.

Simmons said no medical insurance, including Medicare and Medicaid, cover any of the costs of an assistance dog. As such, donations are crucial to PAWS continuing to provide their services to those in need across the country.

“Ninety-five percent of our budget comes from philanthropy, and that means that it comes from people just like you and me. That is the bulk of where we get our money,” said Simmons. She said there are some small family foundations that donate to PAWS and some grants the organization receives, but overall, it is small, individual donations that drive the nonprofit’s funding.

“Some organizations charge their clients for the dog, we’re still very lucky to be in a position where we can provide our dogs at no cost,” said Simmons. “Most people with disabilities are on fixed incomes. They can’t afford a \$35,000 dog. So how do you make that happen? Donors and individual contributions make it happen.” Paws With A Cause receives around 400 applications each year from potential clients seeking assistance or facility dogs. Of these, around 50 dogs each year are placed with their new owners.

HOW TO HELP

Simmons said PAWS is always looking for foster homes, both for the puppies and their parent dogs. For many families, fostering a puppy can be a great “project” to undertake, said Simmons.

Additionally, PAWS has an Amazon wish list where anyone can buy needed supplies for the program, such as Kong toys and peanut butter. The wish list can be found at amzn.to/2vmUXS6.

Paws With a Cause provides several ways for people to contribute money to the organization, with all the options detailed on its website, pawswithacause.org/waystodonate.

For those who don’t want to donate online, PAWS allows phone donations by calling 616-877-7297. Checks can be made payable to Paws With A Cause and sent to the Paws With A Cause National Headquarters, 4646 Division, Wayland, MI 49348.

Readers can download Zappar, an app for smartphones that will allow them to scan the Zappar logo on the ad located within this publication. The Zappar app will open a video for readers that describes the impact PAWS has on its clients.