

## **Future service dogs get their training by women inmates at Coffee Creek lockup**

**By [Jacques Von Lunen, special to The Oregonian](#)**

**October 13, 2009, 5:27AM**

Jacques Von Lunen/Special to The Oregonian

Coffee Creek Correctional Facility inmates who train therapy dogs keep them in their cells and have a higher success rate than the national average, according to Heather Ohmart of Canine Companions for Independence. The heavy steel door clanks shut behind us. Only when it is closed does the next one in front of us slide open onto a long hallway.

Navigating a maze of concrete and steel, we finally arrive in a small conference room. Around the U-shaped table sit seven women. They all wear blue outfits emblazoned with the word "Inmate" in bright orange. By the feet of each woman lies a puppy.

The women are prisoners at the [Coffee Creek Correctional Facility](#) in Wilsonville, serving long sentences for serious crimes. The puppies under the table live with the inmates, who train them to become assistance dogs for a national organization called [Canine Companions for Independence](#).

CCI breeds Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers and mixes of the two. The dogs undergo more than two years of training and are finally given -- free of charge -- to people with physical, cognitive or developmental disabilities, as well as to the hearing impaired. CCI dogs know as many as 50 commands and can open doors, alert their owners to dangers, turn lights on and off and provide calming emotional support.

Newborn puppies in the program are house-trained and taught their names by volunteers until they're 4 months old. Then some go to jail.

There are more than 1,000 CCI puppy-raisers across the country. In Oregon, since 1995, some of them are at Coffee Creek. The dogs live at the prison for a year or so, depending on how quickly they learn. Then they're off to one of five regional CCI training centers, where they get their finishing touches for about six months.

While the dogs are at Coffee Creek, inmates keep them in their cells (cellmates must agree). Being locked together in tight quarters makes for good assistance dogs, the woman who trains the trainers says.

"Inmate handlers are really good at working on commands because they spend so much time with the dogs," says Heather Ohmart, a CCI instructor who works with the inmates weekly. "We have a 45percent success rate here; the nationwide average is about 30 to 35percent."

The puppy-raising program contributes to the state Department of Corrections' mission, part of which is to prepare inmates for a crime-free life.

"What better way to show them what's expected of them when they're released?" says Laurene Brenner, assistant to the prison's superintendent. "What ODC gets out of this is a low recidivism rate."

Since she's been the department's coordinator of the puppy program -- she started in October 2001 -- none of the participants have returned to prison, she said.

The corrections department gets this without spending tax dollars. Portland-area veterinarians treat the animals for free, supplies are donated, and CCI pays for shipping and other expenses.

Training the dogs at Coffee Creek doesn't only improve the women's chances for reintegration, Brenner says. It also changes the culture at the prison and makes it easier for staff to work there.

"'Protect yourself and mind your own business' is the general attitude in jail," Brenner says. "But it's not within the dog group, and that rubs off on others."

The inmates say being around the dogs and working as a team -- dogs rotate from handler to handler each month -- has indeed changed the solitary outlook they had before.

"We give each other advice," says Belinda Ledbetter, who's been a puppy handler for 15 years and who's been in prison for 21 years for murder.

Carolyn Exum says, "This program has taught me better communication." She has 14 years left on her murder sentence; the program keeps her focused. "I can't imagine my life without a dog in it," she says.

The program is a privilege, not a right, at Coffee Creek, and some women applied for years before getting in.

Training a dog all day, every day takes a lot of effort, which the inmates put in on top of their regular work duties. But putting in something extra, preparing dogs to assist people in need, allows these women to make at least some amends.

"It's my way of saying, 'I'm sorry,'" Ledbetter says.

The dogs go on to give to people such as former Army Cavalry scout Joshua Hooker, who served in Iraq with the 101st Airborne. He was badly injured in Baghdad in April 2006. His left leg is amputated below the knee.

Hooker attends [San Diego City College](#). He is an athlete and says he can "do a lot of things." It's important to him to feel useful. But he has trouble bending down to pick things up off the floor.

Now he doesn't have to. He just has to say, "Retrieve," and Phinn picks up whatever he needs. The 4-year-old Labrador mix learned that command from the women at Coffee Creek.

Phinn provides something else for the veteran. "He's always there for me emotionally," Hooker says. "He's a member of my family."

Some limitations aren't as visible as an amputated leg. A physically fit 12-year-old can struggle, too.

Jacques Von Lunen/Special to The Oregonian Taylor Olmsted plays with Sela, a service dog provided by CCI. Taylor Olmsted of Milwaukie has Asperger's syndrome, sometimes described as a highly functional form of autism. He is home-schooled; his dad says he has trouble keeping up with Taylor in math.

But Taylor gets overwhelmed in certain situations and "melts down," mother Judy Olmsted says. It used to take a good half-hour for him to calm down, she says. Taylor was also always reluctant to go anywhere without his parents, including to another room.

Life has changed since Sela, a yellow Lab from CCI, became a member of his family.

"She gives him courage and is a calming influence," Taylor's mother says.

He now goes anywhere, as long as the dog is by his side. His meltdowns last just a few minutes. The only problem Taylor has with his dog?

"She snores really loud," Taylor says.

-- [Jacques Von Lunen](#)

### **How to help**

**To get a CCI dog or to donate to CCI:** [www.cci.org](http://www.cci.org) or 800-572-2275

**To help the Coffee Creek puppy program pay for supplies:** Mail a check to Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Attn. Puppy Program, 24499 S.W. Grahams Ferry Road, Wilsonville, OR 97070