



Calming presence: Coop with K9 support trainer Tessa Stow.

# A CASE FOR CANINE COUNSEL

DOGS THAT ARE HELPING VICTIMS OF ABUSE TELL THEIR STORIES MAY ONE DAY PROVIDE SUPPORT TO WITNESSES IN COURT TOO. **BY KARIN DERKLEY**

At the Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault, a black labrador is sitting quietly, observing a young girl while she plays in a sandbox. As the girl, a victim of sexual abuse, talks to the counsellor, she glances over at Coop and sometimes touches the dog, as if looking to her for reassurance.

Before Coop came to visit the centre, the young girl rarely spoke and was anxious and clingy when separated from her mother, says her counsellor Neta Kirby. Now, as soon as she sees Coop, the girl takes hold of the dog's collar and follows her happily into the counselling session.

The difference is remarkable, says Ms Kirby. With Coop she is calm, engaged and responsive. "There are no signs of the previous withdrawal or anxiety symptoms."

Coop has been coming to the centre in Shepparton for the past six months and the positive impact on clients has been profound, says Andrea Caia, manager of Trauma Informed Services at the centre. "Coop's presence brings a sense of calmness to the whole building."

The anxiety level of a 17 year-old male client, who has an intellectual disability, has also dropped significantly while Coop is present, Ms Caia says. It's a similar story at the Centre Against Violence in Wangaratta,

where Coop has been visiting since March this year.

Those outcomes are consistent with studies of 153 children in a Children's Advocacy Centre in the US that showed that the children in groups that included therapy dogs showed statistically significant decreases in trauma symptoms including anxiety, depression, anger, post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual concerns.

In a setting such as the Centre Against Sexual Assault where anxiety and distress can be acute, the presence of dogs like Coop

lowers victims' stress levels enough for them to be able to tell their story, says Tessa Stow, whose program K9 Support trained Coop, along with other support dogs and their handlers. "It's a layer of support that humans cannot give," says Ms Stow.

"They don't judge and they don't ask questions. Having them there gives the client a feeling of safety and helps lower their blood pressure and stress enough to be able to articulate what they need to say."

Although as a "facility dog" Coop works with a number of "clients" rather than being permanently attached to a particular individual as a guide dog would, she has been trained to the same level as a service or assistance dog. It's a two year process that ensures the dogs are able to cope with the kind of stress that arises when victims or witnesses of abuse give their testimony.

"Facility dogs have to be shown to be safe and stable in public, and to be able to deal with emotional stress, including people shouting and crying," Ms Stow says. As part of Coop's training she has spent time at a school for children with learning disabilities where children often behave unpredictably.

ourselves," she says.

Convinced the prosecutor's office should have its own facility dog to work with victims, Ms O'Neill-Stephens managed to win over the chief prosecutor and members of the sexual assault unit to the idea. During a trial period, it became apparent that the presence of an assistance dog helped reduce the anxiety of witnesses in the court process.

Facility dogs are now used across 21 states in the US, where prosecutors can apply for the dogs to accompany victims and witnesses, and sometimes defendants, into the courtroom when they take the stand.

"We believe the dogs enhance the fact-finding process by calming witnesses so they can think more clearly and respond to questions more accurately," Ms O'Neill-Stephens says. "The result is more accurate testimony for a judge and jury."

On occasion, defence lawyers

the presence of the facility dog helps "facilitate the search for the truth". "I have never seen any juror be influenced by the presence of the dog, in any way," she says.

If a trial of the dogs is permitted by the courts in Australia, Ms Stow says the specially trained court dogs will be taken on by an agency or law firm, where an individual will be designated as a primary handler who will look after the dog, including taking the dog home with them, as well as being trained in handling the dog within the court setting. A secondary handler will act as a backup.

Getting the courts to allow the dogs is the next challenge, says Ms Stow. In October, she met with judges and senior staff from the Magistrates, County and Children's Courts. "The meeting was very positive," she says. "I explained how it worked, and the judges were very interested and seemed very positive about how it could work for children and also for adults."

Following the meeting, the County Court has been holding discussions and is currently looking into the idea of using the dogs in court.

Kerry Burns of the Centre Against Violence in Wangaratta says that for an adult or a child, court can be a traumatic experience that the dogs can help mitigate. "When people are in court they can feel isolated and judged and disbelieved. And once they are giving evidence they're on their own in the witness box and we can't give them support.

"But a dog can sit there and give unspoken support just by being with them there in the witness box, where the witness can touch them if they want."

Given the low rate of sexual abuse convictions, Ms Burns hopes that the presence of the dogs may help by giving witnesses the support to be clear and confident when they give their testimony in court. ■

## ... THE DOGS ENHANCE THE FACT-FINDING PROCESS BY CALMING WITNESSES SO THEY CAN THINK MORE CLEARLY ...

"The idea is that they look to their handler and if you're not worried, they're not worried."

Given the success of Coop's work in the sexual assault agencies, Ms Stow is hoping to get the chance to conduct a trial to show how dogs like Coop could help witnesses, as well as defendants, in the court system.

Court dogs are commonly used in the US, Canada and Chile. Their use was pioneered in the mid-2000s by prosecutor Ellen O'Neill-Stephens after her family acquired an assistance dog for their son Sean, who has cerebral palsy. While she and her husband were receiving instruction on how to handle their dog, Ms O'Neill-Stephens noticed other dogs being trained to assist in various types of institutions. "It occurred to me that facility dogs could also enhance the work that legal professionals do by providing a sense of comfort to the people we served as well as

have lodged objections to the dogs' presence on the basis that they may make a jury more sympathetic to the witness. However, appellates that have reviewed the practice have consistently affirmed its validity, as long as certain conditions are met.

These include informing the jury that they are to draw no inference from the presence of the dog. To allay concerns that a jury might afford extra sympathy for a witness based on the presence of a dog, the dogs are also brought into the witness box before the jury comes in, and are removed only after the jury has left the courtroom – so the jury never sees the dog.

Superior Court Judge Jeanette Dalton in Washington state says that as a sitting trial judge she has found