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Therapy dog to assist crime victims, witnesses

By Vanessa Pellechio Times Staff Writer Oct 11, 2018 Updated Oct 11, 2018



Adams County Commissioner Randy Phiel welcomes Louie, a therapy dog, to the Adams County Courthouse on Wednesday.

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Adams County Commissioner Randy Phiel greeted one of the newest county employees with a paw-shake Wednesday.

This new employee has a big smile, is four-legged and covered in yellow fur.

Commissioners approved an agreement between the county and Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services (KPETS) during the meeting Wednesday.



This agreement is separate from the original contract with the company, which now includes volunteer dog handler Rhonda Kershner and her Golden Retriever named Louie offering animal-assisted therapy services for crime victims and witnesses.

Adams County District Attorney Brian Sinnett presented the provision to commissioners on Wednesday.

“I’m very proud of the handler, who is also my wife, Rhonda Kershner,” Sinnett said.

Kershner, who retired in June after serving over 40 years in the Adams County Courthouse as a court reporter, will return on a volunteer basis to help the district attorney’s office and victim witness department as well as family court.

The courts must give approval for Louie to participate in family court, which is likely to occur in a couple of weeks, Sinnett said.

“A dog can provide a solace no human being can,” Phiel said. “It equates to serving our clients more effectively.”

The couple adopted Louie through GoldHeart Golden Retriever Rescue Organization and think he is 8 years old, according to Sinnett, who noted Louie will start work next week.

Last September, commissioners approved the first compact with the nonprofit.

KPETS is a nonprofit that assists in the recruitment, training, and registering process of pet therapy volunteer teams and links them to facilities and agencies in need, according to the organization's website.

Adams County Solicitor Molly Mudd said Louie will be present when meeting with crime victims and witnesses, as well as assist in the witness waiting room.

"I don't think you'll see the dog in the courtroom," Mudd said.

Phiel said there is no cost to the county for the service.

Commissioner Jim Martin pointed out these are volunteers donating their time after being properly trained.



"When the community sees this service is available, they may be more inclined to bring a child to testify," Martin said.

Commissioner Marty Qually said the trained canine will give children "the ability to relax" while they are "coming into a stressful situation" and assist with "trauma they are going through."

Louie reminded Phiel of his former Golden Retriever named Molly, he said, noting that most know how to shake with their paws. Phiel's Molly would walk by his side when visiting his father at a senior home.

"All the seniors would come to pet her. We tend to gravitate toward dogs," Phiel said.

Phiel commended the solicitor's office for its work "to make sure we are doing this the right way," adding the service benefits clients, the county, and taxpayers.

Mudd said she has seen therapy dogs in action.

"There is a special type of comfort only a dog can bring in these times of stress," she said.



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