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### **SWEARING-IN CEREMONY FOR COURTHOUSE THERAPY DOGS**

Tallahassee, Fl (Date) - The Second Judicial Circuit, comprised of Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty and Wakulla Counties, will hold a Swearing-In Ceremony for the Courthouse Therapy Dogs on Thursday, April 18, 2013 at 5:00 PM in Courtroom 3A, Third Floor of the Leon County Courthouse, in Tallahassee. Circuit Judge James C. Hankinson will be presiding. Twelve specially trained therapy dogs, accompanied by their handler team partners, are slated to participate.

In August 2007, the Second Judicial Circuit became the first court sponsored animal therapy program in Florida. The therapy dog teams are provided by the Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare Animal Therapy Program, at no cost to the Second Judicial Circuit. The therapy dogs were initially available to comfort and support children testifying as victims in violent crimes, and later expanded to assist children participating in dependency court proceedings, and adults as determined by the court to be in need of the service.

Chief Judge Charles Francis thought the program concept had great potential from the start. "We already had teddy bear therapy that we use with children who have gone through traumas. I thought it could work, right off the bat, if the dogs were properly trained and properly controlled."

The first dependency animal therapy court visits statewide began in 2009 in Wakulla County as part of an initiative by Wakulla County Judge Jill Walker to have children participate in dependency court cases. Dependency proceedings involve children who have been abused or neglected, determinations of parental rights, and custody of children. Court proceedings can be extremely emotional and stressful for the parties involved. According to Walker, it is important for children to be present in court, and it is especially important for the judge to obtain as much information as possible from the children. "The dogs are a relaxing resource. Well documented

research shows that petting an animal lowers the levels of cortisol, a stress inducing hormone; we need to be taking advantage of this science. By lowering stress levels that all parties feel coming into court, you can get more complete and more accurate information by having everyone able to focus on the issue at hand. It makes my job easier as the decider of fact.”

The Second Judicial Circuit Courthouse Therapy Dog Program serves as a model for other jurisdictions. The program has assisted nine of the twenty judicial circuits of the State of Florida in implementing similar programs. The Second Circuit program also took the lead in drafting statewide recommendations for the use of therapy dogs in dependency courts.

To date, the therapy dog teams have participated in 55 criminal court events and provided comfort and support to countless children during about 120 dependency court dockets. According to Hankinson, “The swearing-in ceremony is a way for the courts to show our appreciation to the volunteers of the TMH Animal Therapy Program and their animal partners.”

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