



Second Judicial Circuit of Florida

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WHAT: Tenth Anniversary of Animal Therapy in the Courts

WHEN: Wednesday, August 2, 2017 at 4:00 PM

WHERE: Leon County Courthouse - Courtroom 2F

SECOND JUDICIAL CIRCUIT CELEBRATES TEN YEARS OF ANIMAL THERAPY IN THE COURTS

Tallahassee, FL (July 31, 2017) – In honor of the tenth anniversary of the Second Judicial Circuit Animal Therapy Program, the circuit will hold a celebration honoring current and past animal therapy teams. The Second Judicial Circuit is comprised of Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty and Wakulla Counties.

The celebration set for Wednesday, August 2, 2017 at 4:00 PM in Courtroom 2F, Second Floor of the Leon County Courthouse, in Tallahassee will include a swearing-in ceremony for the Courthouse Therapy Teams – handlers and dogs. Chief Judge Jonathan Sjostrom will be presiding.

Authorized by then-Chief Judge Charles A. Francis, the Second Judicial Circuit became the first court sponsored animal therapy program in Florida in August 2007. 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.

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. “Numerous research studies show that petting dogs can have a calming affect by lowering levels of cortisol, a stress inducing hormone. We are taking advantage of this science. By lowering stress levels of parties coming to court, you get more complete and 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 15 of the twenty judicial circuits of the State of Florida in planning 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, 51 animal therapy teams, representing 42 handlers and 49 dogs, have participated in 186 court events and have provided comfort and support to countless children during 323 mass dependency court dockets. According to Sjostrom, “The celebration is a way for the courts to show our appreciation to the volunteers of the TMH Animal Therapy Program and their animal partners.”