

THERAPY DOGS IN THE COURTROOM: A CALMING PRESENCE BUT MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED

The use of therapy dogs in courtrooms has gained increasing attention and recognition in recent years for their potential to provide emotional support and comfort to vulnerable witnesses, particularly children and victims of trauma. While research is limited, studies suggest these furry companions offer emotional support, potentially improving the experience for witnesses and even influencing trial outcomes. This summary reviews the research on therapy dogs in courtroom settings, exploring their impact on witnesses, legal proceedings, and the courtroom environment.

Therapy dogs, specially trained for their role, have been introduced into courtrooms to alleviate stress and anxiety experienced by witnesses during testimony. Research indicates that courtroom settings can be intimidating and distressing, especially for children and individuals who have experienced trauma. Therapy dogs offer a non-judgmental presence that can help witnesses feel more at ease, leading to more precise and accurate testimony.

The primary beneficiaries of therapy dogs in courtroom settings are witnesses, particularly children and victims of crime. Research has shown that children, in particular, are more likely to disclose abuse or trauma when accompanied by a therapy dog, as the dog's presence helps to mitigate the fear and anxiety associated with recounting traumatic experiences in front of unfamiliar adults.

For victims of crime, therapy dogs offer companionship and emotional support during what can be grueling and emotionally draining, testifying in court. This support can empower victims to participate more fully in the legal process, potentially leading to increased prosecution rates and improved justice outcomes.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

- **Reduced Anxiety:** Studies show therapy dogs can significantly lower stress and anxiety in witnesses, as evidenced by physiological measures such as heart rate and cortisol levels. This stress reduction not only benefits the witness's emotional well-being but also potentially enhances their ability to recall and communicate their experiences effectively.
- **Increased Emotional Support:** Therapy dogs provide a source of comfort, allowing witnesses to feel safer and more secure while testifying about potentially traumatic experiences.
- **Improved Rapport:** The presence of a dog can create a more relaxed atmosphere, fostering better rapport between the witness and legal professionals. This can be crucial for drawing out accurate and detailed information.
- **Improved Atmosphere:** Therapy dogs have been observed to improve the overall atmosphere of courtrooms, making them more welcoming and less intimidating. Judges, attorneys, and jurors have reported positive perceptions of the use of therapy dogs, noting their potential to humanize legal proceedings and create a more supportive environment for all participants.

LEGAL & PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Admissibility:** Questions may arise regarding the admissibility of therapy dogs in courtrooms, particularly in adversarial legal systems where strict rules of evidence apply. Advocates argue that therapy dogs should be considered as auxiliary aids that facilitate witness testimony rather than influencing the substantive content of the testimony itself.
- **Juror Bias:** While some studies suggest therapy dogs may positively influence jurors' perceptions of witnesses, others raise concerns that jurors might place undue weight on a witness's testimony due to the emotional connection with the dog.
- **Standardization and Training:** There are no universal guidelines for courtroom therapy dog programs. Standardization is needed to ensure dogs are temperament tested and trained to behave appropriately in the courtroom environment.
- **Disruptions and Allergic Reactions:** The presence of a dog could potentially disrupt courtroom proceedings or trigger allergies in participants. Protocols need to be established to ensure the safety and hygiene of the courtroom environment and establish guidelines for the introduction and use of therapy dogs to avoid any potential disruptions to legal proceedings.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The use of therapy dogs in courtrooms shows promise, particularly for vulnerable witnesses. However, more research is needed to fully understand their impact on courtroom dynamics, juror decision-making, and effectiveness in achieving fair trials. Future research should focus on expanding the evidence base for the effectiveness of therapy dogs in courtroom settings. Longitudinal studies could assess the sustained impact of therapy dogs on witness testimony and legal outcomes over time. Moreover, comparative studies across different jurisdictions and legal systems could provide valuable insights into the cultural and contextual factors that influence the integration of therapy dogs into courtroom practices.

The use of therapy dogs in courtroom settings represents a promising innovation aimed at enhancing the well-being of witnesses and improving the fairness and effectiveness of legal proceedings. While challenges remain, the growing body of research supports the continued exploration and implementation of therapy dogs as a valuable resource in promoting justice and compassion within the legal system. Developing standardized training and protocols will be crucial for ensuring the responsible and ethical use of therapy dogs in this sensitive setting.

KEY RESOURCES

- Courthouse Dogs® Foundation - <https://courhousedogs.org/>
- [Facility Dogs at Children's Advocacy Centers and in Legal Proceedings: Best Practices](#)
- [Therapy Animals Supporting Kids \(TASK\) Program Manual](#)



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