

Furry Friends and Their Inmate Companions Work Together to Secure a Brighter Future

By Griffiee Albaugh

Do you believe in second chances? Marley's Mutts Pawsitive Change Prison Program believes in providing second chances for both human beings and their canine counterparts. Launched in 2016 by Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue, Pawsitive Change is a program unique to California's state prisons that match death row dogs with prison inmates for the purpose of relationship building and rehabilitation.

The fourteen week-long program is led by trainers from Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue and aims to help inmates acquire a vocational skills and their canine companions with their "Canine Good Citizen Certification," tools that will help both parties "...stay out of prisons and/or shelters--respectively," according to the organization's website.

At the forefront of the organization's mission is the cultivation of meaningful and emotionally vulnerable relationships between handler and dog. The program's website offers a survey of the measures utilized to determine both inmate and canine success; these include, but are not limited to, "Increased ability to tolerate and experience emotional discomfort in a constructive manner; increased awareness of the needs and emotions of self and others, and appropriate responses; increased reported sense of self-esteem and social value; increased signs of trust and respect with handlers and other humans; and decreased symptoms of nervousness insecurity, and fear," according to the program's outline available on their website--marleymutts.org. The program's founders and facilitators hope that the cultivation of these qualities, with the support of donors and valuable partnerships between shelters and animal rescue organizations, will help to greatly reduce California's prisoner recidivism rate. The California Innocence Project website, californiainnocenceproject.org, states that, "According to a 2012 report by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, just over 65% of those released from California's prison system return within three years."

The program gives inmates purpose, re-instills a sense of worth and pride, and requires them to take responsibility for another being in need. The response to the program has been powerful and positive. An inmate in the program's second cycle shared that in prison, "we can't show our emotion--it's considered a weakness. But with this program, we can feel-- give and received affection. We become cold in [prison]...But these dogs give us a chance to be human." With mutual respect, understanding, and a few canine kisses, Pawsitive Change is revolutionizing the healing processes of both canines and human beings in need.