

PAWS FOR JUSTICE

“Court can be ruff,” as they say at the Jackson County, Ill., courthouse where Charlie, a goldendoodle therapy dog, is helping ease courtroom anxiety and make the judicial process smoother. This article is excerpted and lightly edited from a recent interview with Patti Clark, director of court operations in the First Judicial Circuit of Illinois, originally published by Illinois Courts.

Tell us about the courthouse therapy dog program at the Jackson County courthouse.

Charlie is a 7-year-old goldendoodle and certified therapy dog through the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. Charlie joined us in July 2024 through a grant awarded to the First Circuit. Since then, he has become an integral part of our team, particularly in drug court, where he attends most sessions and provides a calming and supportive presence. His comforting nature also greatly benefits both children and adult witnesses during interviews and court appearances.

How would you describe Charlie’s daily job?

When Charlie arrives at the courthouse, he comes in a little early to make his rounds and greet the courthouse staff. After his greetings, Charlie’s handler takes him to his scheduled location to meet with a witness. Charlie sits quietly beside the witness for as long as needed, offering comfort and calm. Remarkably, he seems to have a natural ability to sense the emotional state of the person next to him.

How would you describe Charlie?

Charlie is a natural social butterfly. Unless he’s focused on a specific person or task, he thrives on mingling — moving from person to person and soaking up the love. His presence has



a calming effect on those around him, and people are naturally drawn to his gentle energy.

Who does Charlie primarily interact with?

Charlie has become an integral part of the courthouse environment, particularly within the drug court program and juvenile abuse and neglect cases. His consistent presence offers therapeutic support to participants navigating the justice system, many of whom face significant emotional and psychological stress. Charlie is familiar with the routines and individuals involved, and he intuitively engages with those who may benefit most from his calming influence. He contributes to a supportive and trauma-informed courtroom atmosphere, aligning with our goals of increasing engagement, reducing stress, and promoting successful outcomes in treatment court settings.

How do people generally respond to Charlie?

It’s all smiles when Charlie’s around! Even those who claim not to be dog

lovers can’t help but respond positively to him. Shy children, often hesitant to engage with others, happily reach out to connect with Charlie.

Can you share a time when Charlie made a particularly profound impact on someone visiting the courthouse?

When Charlie unexpectedly attended a young child’s adoption ceremony, what was already a joyous occasion became even more memorable. It felt as though Charlie was adopted alongside the child that day, adding an extra layer of warmth and happiness to the special moment.

Why do you think the courthouse therapy dog program is important?

Courts make life-changing decisions on a regular basis. For those of us who work within the system, it’s easy to become comfortable and familiar with the process. However, what we may take for granted is a vastly different experience for the individuals whose lives are profoundly impacted by these decisions. The anxiety of being in court — regardless of which side one is on — can quickly become overwhelming.

Court therapy dogs play an essential role in providing a calming presence and relieving tension for those involved. I firmly believe it is our duty to make the courthouse experience as safe and stress-free as possible for the public we serve. A calmer courtroom not only eases the emotional burden on individuals but also contributes to a more efficient process and enhances safety for court security personnel.

The original article can be found at <https://duke.is/charlie>.