

## Animal Assisted Interventions Focus Feature

In 2015 ASI's Director of Human-Animal Programs, Dr. Lisa Lunghofer, conducted an evaluation<sup>1</sup> of a pilot program that pairs veterans and shelter dogs: Safe Humane Chicago's Veterans Advancing the Lives of Rescues (VALOR) program. VALOR is an eight-week program in which groups of five veterans residing in a transitional living facility socialize and train shelter dogs that have been subjects in abuse and/or neglect court cases. The VALOR program is designed to help veterans gain a sense of self-efficacy, improve self-esteem, learn dog training skills that could be used to gain employment, and receive social support from other veterans.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted with the 10 veterans who participated in the first two cycles of VALOR. Each was asked to describe what he or she got out of the program. Themes identified and examples of comments related to each theme included:

Second chances (dogs and veterans): *"The dogs are angels. It's hard to believe they were abused. I expected a lot of mean dogs that were out of control, but found the sweetest dogs I'd ever met. Helping train dogs that have been abused helps me because they've been through a lot like I have they still have faith and that's what I'm looking for. It gives me hope."*

Prosocial connectedness, decreased isolation: *"The people were genuine and kind. The dogs' love made you feel great. It was sort of like kids. It reminds me of my feeling with my daughter....I have a caregiver in me. When I can't give care, I might as well get drunk. I need a mission."*

Self-efficacy, sense of accomplishment: *"It made me feel good about myself. I did something positive in these dogs' lives. I did something to make their adoption happen."*

Self-confidence, self-worth: *"I have been struggling with suicide and trying to find self-worth. Since I started to work at the shelter I feel worthy. It's hard to believe the dogs have been abused. Helping them overcome that has improved my sense of self-worth."*

Motivation: *"After the program I had less suicidal thoughts. I had more hope for the future. I spend less time on the (suicide) hotline. The program gives you something to look forward to."*

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<sup>1</sup> Findings were presented at both the 2016 Animal Assisted Interventions International conference in Prague, Czech Republic, and the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators conference in Portland, OR.

Individual interviews were also conducted with the program providers to inform refinement of the pilot. Lessons learned and issues for consideration were identified in three areas, including:

| 1. Orientation  | 2. Program Model and Process  | 3. The Dogs  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need a written protocol for all program participants</li> <li>• Get information about participants' comfort level with different types of dogs</li> <li>• Identify triggers</li> <li>• Be sensitive to issues re: physical contact, punctuality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Important to integrate case managers</li> <li>• Need protocol for addressing comments made by participants (“I’m hanging on by a thread.”)</li> <li>• Get feedback at end of each session</li> <li>• Be aware of boundaries</li> <li>• Graduation is very important</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety is paramount</li> <li>• Selection of dogs: Consider consistency so participants feel they have contributed when dog goes to rescue/is adopted</li> <li>• Tell each dog’s story!</li> <li>• Debrief about feelings re: Animal Care &amp; Control</li> </ul> |

