

Research Report on FYDO: Facility Dogs in Europe

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 **Victim Support Europe**



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This research report is a summary of a detailed academic paper that has been developed from the same project, and that will be submitted for publication during 2023.



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INTRODUCTION

Interaction with the justice system has been shown to have significant potential for re-traumatisation of victims. This is known as “secondary traumatisation”. International law obliges States to implement measures designed to make investigations and prosecutions less traumatic for victims and more sensitive to their needs; but leaves a wide degree of latitude to States as to the means to be used to implement that obligation.

One method of mitigating trauma for victims of crime that has been successfully implemented in North America is partnering victims with “facility dogs”, which are specially-trained dogs that accompany victims to police interviews, forensic examinations, and court testimony. Evidence to date indicates that facility dogs have had a positive impact in the context of children who experience child sex abuse. However, facility dogs have seen little use to date outside of North America, or in cases involving other categories of victims.

The FYDO project (2021-2022) piloted the use of facility dogs with victim support organisations in Belgium, France and Italy. The work of the project included adult and child victims; victims of sexual offences as well as other crimes; and victims of domestic violence living in shelters. As such, the project broke new ground both geographically and in the range of victims who utilised the service. This research report will briefly summarise the research undertaken during the project.

1. SECONDARY AND VICARIOUS TRAUMATISATION

Victims face psychological and emotional stress when interacting with the justice system, placing them at high risk of secondary traumatisation (Holder, 2013). Testifying in court can create a feeling of isolation, and witnesses may feel anxiety and shame being watched by strangers (Glazer, 2018). Children who have suffered the trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA) typically struggle to share details of their experiences with others (Crenshaw *et al*, 2016) and are likely to mistrust adults, which can hinder communication (Parish-Plass, 2008). This leads to difficulties answering questions in court, affecting the validity and reliability of evidence given (McDermott *et al*, 2020). Children also struggle building rapport with professionals in the justice system, finding the experience of speaking to strangers about traumatic circumstances difficult (Spruin *et al*, 2020).

Adult victims also experience increased stress when interacting with the justice system (Kelly, 2022), and are in need of additional supports (Braun, 2014). Professionals in the justice system have demonstrated little respect for the victims they interact with, which can increase the risk of secondary traumatisation for victims (Katz *et al*, 2022). Adult victims experience difficulty testifying in court and recounting traumatic experiences. Professionals fail to adequately communicate with victims throughout all stages of the justice process, hindering their ability to effectively participate (Brown *et al*, 2022).

2. INTERNATIONAL LAW OBLIGATIONS

International law has responded to the risk of secondary traumatisation of victims by imposing a range of obligations on States to implement measures to mitigate this risk. In the European Union, Directive 2012/29/EU (“the Victims’ Rights Directive”) recognises that some victims are “particularly at risk of secondary and repeat victimisation”, including victims of violence in close relationships, sexual violence and gender-based violence. Child victims “tend to experience a high rate of secondary and repeat victimisation”. Article 22 of the Directive obliges member states to “ensure that victims receive a timely and individual assessment ... to identify specific protection needs and to determine whether and to what extent they would benefit from special measures in the course of criminal proceedings ... due to their particular vulnerability to secondary and repeat victimisation”. Child victims “shall be presumed to have specific protection needs due to their vulnerability to secondary and repeat victimisation”, but shall nevertheless be subject to an individual assessment to determine whether and to what extent they would benefit from special measures.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC) provides in Article 39 that States Parties shall provide appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery of a child victim. In its General Comment No 13 in 2011, the Committee on the Rights of the Child explained that this means that States Parties must ensure the protection of child victims and witnesses and enforce law and judicial procedures in a child-friendly way.

The 2007 Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (“the Lanzarote Convention”) provides in Article 14 that States Parties must take the necessary measures to assist victims of CSA in their physical and psycho-social recovery. Article 13 requires States Parties to adopt a protective approach towards victims of CSA, ensuring that the investigations and criminal proceedings do not aggravate trauma. Similarly, Article 18 of the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (“the Istanbul Convention”) provides that States must aim to avoid secondary victimisation and address specific needs of vulnerable persons.

3. SPECIALISED SUPPORT: ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY AND FACILITY DOGS

The benefits of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) are well-documented. Multiple studies indicate that merely being in the presence of animals can decrease heart rate and blood pressure and improve responses to stress. Contact with animals contributes to psychological well-being by ameliorating the effects of potentially stressful life events, enhancing feelings of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem (Wells, 2009). AAT has proved beneficial for individuals such as victims of crime (Dellinger, 2009); patients in an emergency department (Carey *et al*, 2002); children with disabilities (Nimer and Lundahl, 2007); and people undergoing psychiatric treatment (Prothmann *et al*, 2006).

Facility dogs have been shown to provide multiple benefits to child victims of crime who are at risk of secondary traumatisation, including in the court waiting room, forensic interviews and courtroom testimony (Spruin *et al*, 2020). The presence of a facility dog accompanying the child leads to decreased biological stress indicators (Krause-Parello and Friedmann, 2014). The dog provides comfort and assists a child witness to remain calm so that they can cognitively process and respond to the questions (Crenshaw *et al*, 2016). This increased sense of comfort leads to a safer environment for disclosures to take place.

Research conducted with adults has also demonstrated the benefits of AAT. Studies have reported that AAT has provided improvements for patients in a variety of healthcare settings (Carey *et al*, 2002; Sikstrom *et al*, 2020). AAT has also been used to assist adults with cognitive difficulties, such as Alzheimer's (Chang *et al*, 2021), and has demonstrated positive effects for adults with mental health difficulties (Monfort *et al*, 2020). Like children, adults who are victims of trauma can also have difficulty discussing their experiences (Kelly, 2022). Adult victims

of sexual offences have reported both physical and emotional benefits following interaction with facility dogs (Spruin *et al*, 2020). AAT has allowed adult victims to feel more comfortable opening up about their experiences which in turn led some perpetrators to plead guilty (Howell *et al*, 2021).

4. FYDO PROJECT: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The FYDO project aimed to assess the efficacy of facility dogs as a means of mitigating secondary traumatisation for victims of crime, and vicarious traumatisation of victim support staff, through a mixed-methods survey of victims and staff members participating in three pilot facility dogs projects (one with a police service in Belgium; one with a victim support service in France; and one with a domestic violence shelter in Italy).

Victims using these services were invited to participate in the research by completing two questionnaires (one before their police interview or courtroom testimony, and another afterwards), assessing their well-being and anxiety on a validated Likert Scale and answering a number of open qualitative questions regarding their feelings at the time of the interview and the impact of the facility dog (where used). Staff of the various services were asked to complete pre-interview and post-interview questionnaires regarding their observations on the emotional state of the victims and the impact of the facility dog (where used). Where victims were accompanied by a parent or support person, this person was also invited to complete a questionnaire.

The qualitative data was generally consistent and showed that most victims found the presence of a facility dog helpful and re-assuring during their interactions with the justice system. Two main effects were identified: the dog had a calming effect on victims who were finding the situation stressful, and in turn, this assisted victims to express themselves more effectively. For example:

Pre-interview: *"I'm empty sometimes. I feel like a raft lost on the open sea."*

Post-interview: *"The dog helped me to express myself more clearly ... his presence allowed me not to be intimidated, I hardly ever looked for my words, the words came by themselves in fact ... I noticed that I cry less when she is present."* (Female, 54, domestic violence)

In line with the findings of previous studies, the calming and soothing effect of the dog during the most difficult moments of a police interview was a notable feature of the data:

"Yes, the dog helps a lot during the interview, he allows you to pause when the emotion is too much ... he helps to soothe painful moments, when we recount our experience and what it feels like." (Female, 37, domestic violence)

A minority of participants attributed positive experiences during their interviews to the victim support professional rather than the dog:

"I was happy that the dog was there but as I was already confident, I was very comfortable with the psychologist, Orphee didn't necessarily make me feel better ... It was great fun to see a dog, I would rather say that it added more." (Female, 21, sexual abuse)

The use of facility dogs over an extended period of time with victims living in a domestic violence shelter was a novel aspect of the FYDO project. The data is very encouraging about the benefits of this approach, with participants speaking positively about the impact of the dog both on the adult victim of domestic violence, and on children that are accompanying them in the shelter:

"I feel better and safer if the dogs are with me ... Dogs are good for my son, he loves dogs and he can concentrate when the dogs are present ..." (Female, 30, domestic violence)

"... I prefer to deal with dogs rather than humans. Dogs are good also for my children, it helps them being more relaxed and happy. For me the presence in the shelter of the dogs has been by far the best thing that happened in months." (Female, 30, domestic violence)

A number of victims spoke about a feeling of trust towards the facility dog:

"... for me the presence of the dog is extremely important, it helps me express emotions that I cannot express with people, it gives me solace ... I know I can trust him and he can trust me." (Female, 55, domestic violence)

There were relatively few variances in the data regarding the experiences of victims of different genders or ages, or victims of different crimes. The main variation was that teenagers and adults were more consistently positive about facility dogs than young children, who had more mixed views:

"Fluf is cute, he is a really calm and good dog and I immediately felt less rushed thanks to him." (Male, 7 sexual abuse)

"No. I like small dogs but this one is too big and I'm scared of it." (Female, 6, sexual abuse)

Victims support professionals shared the perception that the presence of a facility dog had a beneficial calming impact on victims:

“The dog helped the victim to feel calmer and made her laugh (Orphee drank water for 3 minutes so we could joke about it). Yes, the victim is very comfortable with having Orphee around.”

“Orphee was able to help the victim relax and reassure him. I think that the dog also made it possible to make the link with me because the victim was very afraid of meeting a psychologist.”

DISCUSSION

The international body of evidence regarding the benefits of facility dogs as a means of mitigating secondary traumatisation of victims in the justice system is increasing all of the time. The results of the FYDO project bolster this evidence in new contexts - particularly in respect of adult victims of domestic violence (including while living in shelters). International law instruments oblige States to take measures aimed at mitigating the risk that victims of crime will experience secondary traumatisation when interacting with the justice system. The evidence produced by the FYDO project helps to advance the case for national governments to support the introduction of facility dogs as part of their efforts to discharge their obligations under EU, UN and Council of Europe human rights law.

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