



Impact Evaluation

Summary

"My service dog has been really important to my life. I wouldn't have made so much progress without her. I wouldn't have gotten to where I am without her being there."

Pawsitivity Service Dogs is a small Minnesota-based nonprofit with a big impact on the people it serves. Pawsitivity trains rescue dogs as service animals for adults and children with disabilities. Pawsitivity has a highly individualized approach that matches unique animals with unique people to build a powerful partnership.

This evaluation examines the impact that Pawsitivity service dogs have on the people they serve. As you will see, the impact is substantial. Not only did the individuals who received the service dog show important progress, the service dogs helped caregivers and families too.

People with disabilities made important progress with the help of their service dog.

People everywhere believe that dogs have a special bond with their humans. The people who received Pawsitivity service dogs are no different. Pawsitivity service dogs have a real connection with and an incredible impact on the people they serve.

Individuals Develop a Caring Companionship. The training that Pawsitivity gives to both their service dogs and handlers prepare them to be successful companions to each other. Most people described how their service dog made a difference in their lives by simply being there, physically and emotionally, when they needed them. For adults and children alike, the responsibility of caring for their service dog could give their day purpose and structure.

For the children with autism, practicing and displaying empathy for another being helped them progress developmentally. Multiple parents appreciated that their child was showing an emotional connection and developing a relationship with someone other than a parent.

Individuals Improve Emotional Regulation. Many of the adults and children who received a Pawsitivity service dog struggled with anxiety, fear, anger, or outbursts. Almost everyone reported that the service dog helped the individual manage these feelings and return more quickly to a calmer state. Many caregivers reported that the service dog's response was the most effective calming tool they had. Adults and children also improved their emotional regulation over time. Individuals were calmer overall with fewer emotional events.

Some of the children feared medical treatments or had trauma from them. Parents were relieved that the service dog could accompany the child to medical treatment and improve the experience.

Individuals Gain Confidence and Independence. With the help of their service dog, adults and children were able to build confidence and

"I am most proud of the relationship that my son has with his dog. The affection and sense of responsibility that he has. It says a lot about his inner life. We can get glimpses of his feelings and his thoughts by how they interact. That is super valuable to me."



"The service dog gives me an overall sense of security and independence. I am not as afraid to go into a public area where I can be vulnerable."

gain independence. For many, confidence came from the reassurance that with their service dog they could safely handle new or challenging situations. Feeling in control of strong emotions opened up a world of possibilities for many of the adults and children. The service dogs supported successful integration into school. For many adults and children, the reassuring presence of the service dog allowed more independent behavior. Adults and children experienced a general increase in physical activity.

Some children started sleeping independently for the first time when they received their service dog and that sleep quality improved. Some parents saw their child's language improve after receiving the service dog. Children spoke to their service dog or enjoyed speaking to others about their service dog.

Individuals Build Self-Esteem Through Social Interactions. Adults and children experienced positive social interactions when their service dog was with them. Some parents reported that their child would not be having social interactions if not for the service dog. The service dog promotes comfortable social interactions because it provides a focal point and a conversation starter. In these interactions, adults and children received positive instead of negative feedback about being different. Parents appreciated that the service dog was a recognized and accepted signal to the public that their child has a disability. Children were very proud of their "special dog." Parents used the service dog to talk to their child about how being different is ok. The positive attention children received reinforced this message and helped build the child's self-esteem. Positive social interactions led to new friendships for some of the children who struggled socially before. Schoolmates were interested and intrigued by the special dog that came to school. Playing with the service dog was an easy and exciting reason for playdates.

"Before [our service dog], my son's emotions would get bigger and bigger and bigger and explode. We don't have that anymore. He is able to control himself more."



"My son never had a play date before we had our service dog. He never had friends. Now, kids want to come over to our house so that they can pet the dog when he's now working."

Caregivers and families experienced ripple effects from the service dog.

The stories of the families who received Pawsitivity service dogs were inspiring. In many ways, caregivers and families benefited as much from the service dog as the person receiving care.

Caregivers Gain Independence. Caregivers found the service dog to be an indispensable tool. The service dog took over some of the caregiving and companionship responsibilities that the caregiver had been performing. Caregivers gained healthy independence from the person needing care. Being able to continue a career, go on a date, take a walk, or even just be in a different room made a big difference.

Many caregivers were comforted that the service dog was always with the person needing care. Knowing that the service dog was with their child, parents could step away. Adults with disabilities said their family members were reassured to know that the dog would help them when they weren't there. Caregivers were amazed at what the service dog noticed and alerted them to.

Family Dynamics Improve. Many families talked about the joy that the service dog brought to their whole family. Parents appreciated that with more of their child's caretaking needs covered by the service dog, the family could focus on aspects of family life not related to caregiving. Parents appreciated having more time and energy to spend with other children or their spouse. They saw that everyone in the family benefited from this new balance.

Families observed that the service dog was a focal point for bringing the family together (cuddling on the couch or going for a walk). For some, family vacations were now possible with the service dog making travel easier by simply riding along in the car or airplane. People said that everyone in the family received emotional care from the service dog.

Handlers Have New Work and Stress. People were realistic about the time and effort it takes to have and maintain a service dog in a household. Service dogs have their own personalities and needs. If the

[Before] my other children had to take a back seat to the child that was in the most need. It was stealing their childhood. Having the service dog with my son, it means my other children can be kids."



"There's more to manage than I thought. I thought it would be turnkey. Everybody thinks service dogs are magic, but Tom told me it takes a while. I did get frustrated once. I felt I was maxed out."

service dog was sick, it became more of a burden than a help. Some parents of younger children struggled with maintaining the service dog's routine and training while also caring for their children.

Nearly every parent expressed anxiety about the future death of their child's service dog. The dog was so important that they worried about how its absence would affect their child.

Pawsitivity provides a high-quality service.

Pawsitivity builds long-term relationships with its families. People took as a given the high-quality training that they and their service dog received. They appreciated the relationship they had with Tom and Julie through initial contact, training, and beyond.

Pawsitivity Listens and Adapts. People appreciated that Pawsitivity listened to and adapted to their needs. Service dogs need care and routine to maintain their training. The family life of the people who received a service dog was often complicated. It included school and homecare, multiple children, multiple disabilities, more than one pet, or split families. Families appreciated that Pawsitivity worked with them to successfully integrate a service dog into their unique family life. Some people noted that they came to Pawsitivity because other service dog providers did not train service dogs for their disability or situation.

One critical aspect of Pawsitivity's service was the home visiting period. Most people highlighted the importance of Pawsitivity coming to their home and providing on-site training based on their daily routines. This on-site training helped integrate the service dog into the new environment and helped the family troubleshoot with high support.

Pawsitivity is Available and Supportive. Pawsitivity continued to support the families and individuals with service dogs beyond the initial training. People felt comfortable texting or calling Pawsitivity with questions and appreciated Pawsitivity's responsiveness. Some mentioned that Pawsitivity provided additional training to help with a unique situation that popped up after the initial transition to the home. Perhaps most importantly, most families and individuals who received service dogs felt that they had a caring friendship with Tom and Julie. Some of the people who received service dogs said that they considered Tom and Julie a part of their family.

"Tom and Julie were willing to listen to us. They were willing to work with us. They understood our situation."



"You can just tell that Pawsitivity is wholly invested in their kids, their families, and their dogs."

While planning this evaluation, Pawsitivity wondered if their service dogs were making people's lives easier or harder. Through the stories of the families in this report, it is clear that while at times their lives are not always easier, their lives are most certainly better. The improvements that the children, adults, caregivers, and families made with the help of their service dog have changed their lives and paved the way for a higher quality of life in the future.

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Aurora Consulting is a full-service evaluation firm. Our role as independent evaluator is to accurately portray the impact of a Pawsitivity service dog from the perspective of the individuals and families who received one. We used a rigorous qualitative evaluation method to describe the results in this report.

We invited a representative from every available family that had received a service dog from Pawsitivity in the past eight years to participate in the evaluation. Ten out of these 14 people participated in a 45-minute phone interview. We interviewed six mothers of boys with autism along with other disabilities or health concerns (aged 4-11 when they received a service dog), three adults with disabilities, and one caregiver of an adult with a disability.

