

Impact Evaluation



**Pawsitivity
Service Dogs**

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INTRODUCTION

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 was substantial and often lifechanging.

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

- People were supported and motivated by the caring companionship of their service dog.
- People improved their emotional regulation in the moment and over time.
- People gained the confidence, independence, and self-esteem to live how they wished.

Caregivers and families experienced ripple effects from having the service dog.

- Caregivers gained independence.
- Families dynamics improved.

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. We also interviewed a special education teacher who uses a Pawsitivity trained therapy dog in her classroom. Her situation was unique, but many of her responses were similar to the families'.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

To identify the intended outcomes of a Pawsitivity service dog, Aurora interviewed staff and reviewed logic models and theories of change. We identified four areas of impact to explore:

- Direct impacts on the individual with a disability.
- Direct impacts on the caregiver's wellbeing and effectiveness.
- Results of these impacts on family and home life.
- Results of these impacts on public and social life.

We also examined the qualities of Pawsitivity as an organization that were helpful or challenging for the people who received service dogs.

At the time of this report, Pawsitivity has placed service dogs with 23 families or individuals since 2012. We invited 14 recipients to participate in this evaluation, excluding recipients who were unavailable due to death or poor health or whose service dog was deceased. Ten of the fourteen people we invited participated in this study.

We wrote an open-ended interview and used it to talk to the adults who received a service dog and the caregivers who handled a service dog for their child. We audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. We did qualitative analysis of the transcriptions looking for common themes or important outliers.

Throughout this report, we provide interview quotes to illustrate each theme. The quotes come from the interview recordings and have been lightly edited to improve readability. Aurora conducts confidential interviews and does not identify speakers.



INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS

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.

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INDIVIDUALS DEVELOP A CARING COMPANIONSHIP

People everywhere believe that dogs have a special bond with their humans. The people who received Pawsitivity service dogs are no different. Most of the families and individuals described how their service dog made a difference in their lives by simply being there, physically and emotionally, when they needed them.

“Having a service dog’s unconditional love—a bond that never goes or redirects or gets mad at you—is huge.”

Some people interviewed for this study remarked that they sought out a service dog because they believed in the benefits of having an animal in the house but knew an untrained pet would not work. The training that Pawsitivity gives to both their service dogs and handlers prepare them to be successful companions.

“Our service dog is the best tool we’ve ever had.”

Typically, we think of a service animal as caring for their human. But, taking care of an animal was a rewarding activity for many of the individuals. For adults and children alike, the responsibility of caring for their service dog could give their day purpose and structure.

“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.”

“My son doesn’t have a lot of friends. The dog became his friend. Something he could depend on. Something stable in a world that doesn’t feel stable at all.”



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.

“When my other child is having a bad day, my son will let his service dog sleep with her. He’s thinking about someone else, which he wouldn’t have done before. He’s recognizing that someone is struggling. He knows his dog helps him so he’s going to let the dog sleep with his sibling. Those are profound changes from where he was.”

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. They reported a change both in the moment and over time. Families saw the service dogs effectively respond to a strong emotional situation and use techniques (such as applying physical pressure) that help the individual manage that emotion. Many caregivers reported that the service dog’s response was the most effective calming tool they had. The special education teacher said that her Pawsitivity therapy dog was more effective at calming students than any of her other therapy tools.

“My service dog has helped me a lot in the middle of my panic attacks. I would scream, cry, and sometimes hurt myself. My parents couldn’t do anything without a risk of getting hurt. It’s not like they could sit on me and stop me from doing anything, but my service dog can. I’ll start petting her and focusing all of my energy on her rather than directing it at myself, which makes feeling anxiety attacks a lot easier. They don’t last quite as long. She’s really helping.”

Adults and children also improved their emotional regulation over time. Individuals were calmer overall with fewer emotional events. One family said that the presence of the service dog helped “take the nervous energy down a notch.” Others said the dog was comforting, providing stability or emotional security.

“If my son is having a bad day, we can tell him to go hug the dog. Before, his emotions would get bigger and bigger and bigger and explode. We don’t have that anymore. He is able to control himself more.”



Some of the children feared medical treatments or had medical trauma. Parents were relieved that the service dog could accompany the child to medical treatment and improve the experience. For one family, the service dog allowed the child to resume treatments that had been canceled.

“My son had become so traumatized by the hospital that he wouldn’t leave the house. He had medical PTSD. We had to stop all his therapies. It is almost impossible to put into words what having our service dog means. He goes to every hospital visit with my son. My son is still afraid but as long as his dog is with him it is tolerable, and we are able to get the medical stuff done for him.”

INDIVIDUALS GAIN CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

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

“After my husband’s accident, he couldn’t even go out the front door. With the help of his service dog, he gained the confidence to be able to do some of the things that he desired to do. It was like he blossomed back to life. His whole demeanor improved. He wasn’t so scared of life itself.”

For many adults and children, the reassuring presence of the service dog allowed more independent behavior. For some individuals, the service dog performed guide or support functions allowing the person to navigate safely from their home, or back to it in the case of an emergency. For children with elopement behavior, the service dog was another layer of support that allowed the child or caregiver to feel safer outside the home.

“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.”

Adults and children experienced a general increase in physical activity. For some, the responsibility of regular walks with the dog was a physical and therapeutic benefit. For others, physical activity increased because the dog gave them the security to leave the house more frequently.



“I go out of the house more with my son. We have access to a wider variety of activities. We go swimming at the beach. Our service dog can get right out there. That’s the best part because not only does my son bolt on land, he bolts on water!”

Some service dogs accompanied a child to school. Families found the dog to be helpful in supporting the child in this setting. Children who brought their service dog to school liked sharing their special dog with others and enjoyed the attention they received. The special education teacher reported that her Pawsitivity therapy dog helped children visiting the sensory room to “reset” so that they could return quickly to their mainstreamed classroom.

“I never thought my son was going to go to school. We tried and it was so traumatic. We gave up. I didn’t expect so much change when we got our service dog. My son thrived in school. I never thought that was going to happen. That was big for me, to get a piece back that I didn’t think would happen.”

Some parents reported that their child started sleeping independently for the first time when they received their service dog and that sleep quality improved (for everyone!)

“At age 14, my son still wanted to sleep with us. He had huge separation anxiety. When he got his service dog, he didn’t sleep with us anymore. He sleeps with his dog. That’s huge that he can do that. It shows me that he can connect with someone else.”

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. One mother said she thinks that the language improvements her son made were also supported by the improved quality of sleep that came with the service dog.

“Our service dog elicits a lot of language from my son. You could see this steadily increase over time. As his language came back, she helped by drawing it out.”

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.



“When we take our service dog out in public, it’s a great way for my son to engage. He meets other kids and adults because everyone loves the dog. My son wants people to pet his dog. It’s his social bridge. At school in the morning, he has a crowd around him.”

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. Having a dog that siblings envy probably contributed as well.

“The level of pride my son has in the dog is amazing. He loves her and it’s okay that he is different. He is special because he has the dog.”

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. Likewise, one adult appreciated that being more confident leaving the house allowed them to reconnect with friends.

“My son never had a play date before we had our service dog. He never had friends. He was afraid of kids his own age. Honestly, they were a little afraid of him, too. I bring the dog to school and talk to his class. Now, kids want to come over to our house so that they can pet the dog when he’s now working.”



Seeing a child improve their self-esteem was an important milestone for parents. Parents felt proud to see their child develop an independent and positive identity.

“I felt immensely proud of my son when he told me that he had opened up about autism to some of his friends and told them the dog was his service dog. It showed his self-acceptance. He wasn’t ashamed or afraid. He could show his true self.”

Parents also appreciated that the service dog was a recognized and accepted signal to the public that their child has a disability. Parents had experienced stigma in public about their parenting or their child’s behavior. Simply having a service dog along helped them feel more comfortable and affirmed.

“We deal with a lot of things in public that if we didn’t have a service dog, people would think we have a really naughty kid and should be handling our kid better. Having this dog shows people that we do have a handicap and it’s okay.”

FAMILY IMPACTS

The stories of the families who received Pawsitivity service dogs were inspiring. Caregivers shared the important ripple effects that the service dog had in their life and family. Caregivers worried less, gained independence, and improved family dynamics.

CAREGIVERS GAIN INDEPENDENCE

Caregivers found the service dog to be an indispensable tool. In many ways, the caregivers benefited as much from the service dog as the person receiving care. The service dog took over some of the caregiving and companionship responsibilities that the caregiver had been performing. Caregivers gained time, peace of mind, and a new sense of life balance.

“The dog picked up a lot of care I was giving. [Before,] I was always there beside him. I was there to help him sooth—help him through his episodes. The dog took my place for those things.”

Many caregivers were comforted that the service dog was always with the handler. 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.

“I know there's another pair of eyes on my son no matter where I am in the house. That really helps me survive and not worry so much.”

Caregivers were amazed at what the service dog noticed and alerted them to. Some caregivers relied on the service dog to signal trouble or unusual activity.

“Our service dog is our guardian angel. My son had a seizure in the middle of the night. His service dog came to get my husband and I. Previously, he had had a seizure where he almost choked and died. So those are things I worry about. Our service dog alleviates the pressure [of monitoring] from me.”

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. One

“I'm a better mom because the pressure of caregiving is not 100%. It's not 24/7. I get a break to recharge because my son has a service dog.”



parent remarked that this new independence was not only healthy for her but that it helped her son's development as well.

“I've never come across anything tougher in my life than being a full-time caregiver. My time was being consumed. I could not have kept my job without the service dog. The dog allowed me the freedom to continue with the things that were in my life before the diagnosis.”

FAMILY DYNAMICS IMPROVE

Some of the parents of children with disabilities said they had grieved the loss of a “normal” childhood for their family. Having a dog in the family was one way to feel normal. Many families talked about the joy that the service dog brought to their whole family.

“We had never had a dog and I had heard that they did wonders for kids on the autism spectrum. We were quite frankly grasping. We needed to find some semblance of a normal life because for 13 years we hadn't had anything like a normal childhood for my son.”

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.

“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. They don't have to bear the responsibility of making sure their brother is safe.”

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.

“My family can go and do things we weren't doing before. Now we fly on airplanes three times a year. Without our service dog, my family would be unable to stay together when we travel. My husband and I would be living separate lives. He would be taking one child and I'd be taking the other.”



People said that everyone in the family received emotional care from the service dog. Multiple people said that the service dog was first to notice that another family member was sick or having trouble. The dog was a comfort to them. Parents of multiple children said that the service dog helped their other children cope with their emotions.

“My son taught his service dog to hug. She will do that to anybody who needs it. For my other kids, the dog is a way they can calm down when they are upset. They all do that. She definitely has been a comfort for my other kids and myself as well.”

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 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. Many people said that the service dog helped them be in public, but one parent said that the personality of their service dog meant that the dog wasn’t always helpful in public.

“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 and I needed to put my focus back on my son.”

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. They mentioned doing the math to figure out where their child would be in school during the end of the service dog’s expected lifetime. One parent said that her child worries about the death of the dog and it exacerbates his anxiety.

“I am so grateful to our service dog. I worry constantly about what life would be like if we lost him. I worry that my son would revert back to what he was like before our dog. As far as I’m concerned, our service dog is irreplaceable.”



QUALITIES OF PAWSITIVITY

Pawsitivity builds long-term relationships with its families. The people who received service dogs took as a given the high-quality training that the service dogs and their family 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.

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

Some people noted that they came to Pawsitivity because other service dog providers did not train service dogs for their disability or situation. For instance, one person could not find another service dog provider that served non-veterans with PTSD. Another person had a particular set of requirements that could not be met by other providers.

“The other places I called said, we don’t train for that, or we don’t have that available. They just shut you down right away. Tom listened to my story and said we might have a fit for you. He didn’t just cut me off. He was open to maybe we could make this work. The more we talked, we realized it was very doable.”

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 a high level of support.

“Pawsitivity did a really good job of getting my service dog into what I would be doing every day. Tom took us places that would be part of my daily routine.”

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



PAWSITIVITY IS AVAILABLE AND SUPPORTIVE

Pawsitivity continued to support the families and individuals with service dogs beyond the initial training. Many people and families who received service dogs maintained communication with Pawsitivity after the initial training and handoff. People felt comfortable texting or calling Pawsitivity with questions and appreciated Pawsitivity's responsiveness.

"I feel free to text Pawsitivity. I'll text them when something is going on or if there is a problem. I texted Tom when my service dog first got sick and I kept her from working. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. He said, 'You are using your judgement and that's good.'"

Some of the families and individuals who received service dogs thought that Pawsitivity went above and beyond in providing help after the initial training. Some mentioned that Pawsitivity provided additional training to help with a unique situation that popped up after the initial transition to the home. Others commented that Pawsitivity always seemed to be sending them toys and tools for their service dog.

"I was surprised at how many products they have sent me over time. When we moved, they sent me a second mat for our service dog to use. Tom sent me a free bag of dog food. They send me toys and goodies now and then."

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 is so caring and thoughtful. When we first met him, instantly, the whole family felt a connection. I now consider Tom and Julie good friends. They have become very special people to us."



CONCLUSION

While planning for 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 important 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.

"When people ask me, 'Is it worth it?' Oh, absolutely it's worth it!"



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thanks for talking with me. I want to understand how having [dog] has helped you and your family.

1. I understand you/your child has a disability. Can you tell me a little more about that?
 2. Why did you seek a service dog? What were you hoping/expecting a service dog would help with?
 3. Had you looked into other ways to get a service dog? What stood out to you about Pawsitivity?
 4. How have your/your child's symptoms improved since getting [dog]?
 5. Do you have an example of an important moment when [dog] helped or protected you/your child?
 6. How has your/your child's need for care or use of care changed since receiving [dog]?
 7. What's gotten better for [caregiver/your family] since receiving [dog]. What changes have you seen?
 8. How has your/your child's life outside of the home changed since having [dog]?
 9. How has your/your child's relationships with others outside your immediate family changed since having [dog]?
 10. Think about the improvements you/your child has made since receiving [dog]. Which are you most proud of?
 11. Overall, how important has [dog] been to your/your child's/family's life?
 12. As you are looking to the future, what are you hoping for?
- Think back to when you worked with Pawsitivity to transition [dog] into your home.
13. What were some of the most helpful things Pawsitivity did?
 14. What was difficult about transitioning [dog] into the home?
 15. What do you think Pawsitivity could improve for other families like you?

