

Woof program offers second chances

Heather Knight

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Eight formerly homeless people sat in a conference room on a recent afternoon with a white board in front reading "Welcome Woofers!" and two dogs roaming around, licking their faces.

It was the first training session in a seven-week course to teach the down-on-their-luck supportive housing residents how to foster problematic puppies through the city's new Woof program (Wonderful Opportunities for Occupants and Fidos.) Participants will get a small weekly stipend as long as they promise not to panhandle for extra cash.

Rebecca Katz, director of Animal Care and Control, began the training by addressing the fact that as soon as word of the program got out in these very pages, pretty much everybody acted like an untrained puppy and, well, defecated all over her plan.

Many media outlets ripped the idea; the Week magazine called it "a classic bleeding-heart liberal approach to a social problem." Then People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals wrote a letter to Mayor **Ed Lee**, condemning the idea.

"Most former panhandlers are financially destitute because of because of struggles with substance abuse and mental-health issues of their own," PETA wrote. "It should be out of the question to play Russian roulette with these animals."

Katz told the eight initial participants, "It's unfair and small-minded, and I'm looking forward to proving them wrong." Sure, San Francisco has tried some famously wacky things when it comes to the animal world. The Board of Supervisors in 2003 voted to call pet owners "pet guardians," and the Animal Care and Control Commission last year proposed banning the sale of goldfish. That went nowhere, so people are still free to be goldfish owners, er, guardians.

Those were solutions in search of a problem, but for Katz, the problem prompting the call for Woof is staring her in the face: a jam-packed city animal shelter where more and more dogs are being brought every day by people who've lost their jobs or their homes.

It's become so bad, the small dogs are being kept in cat cages, rescue groups around the state have told Katz not to call them for help because they're jammed too, and more pets are being euthanized. The shelter is putting down 48 dogs per month, compared with 28 per month before the recession struck.

Many of the dogs who are killed could be nurtured into adoptable animals with enough human help, but the shelter has an annual budget of just \$60,000 for all behavior and training services, Katz said.

If teaming a puppy who's timid, rowdy or otherwise not yet adoptable with a formerly homeless person keeps the animal alive, why not try it, Katz said. Homeless people and supportive housing residents sometimes make the best animal companions because they're with them 24/7, despite what PETA thinks, she said.

"People in San Francisco will step over a homeless person to help their dog," Katz said. "We give animals second, third and fourth opportunities when we can. They're not willing to give people that, and I think that's unfair."

One pup likely to be given another chance through Woof was a nameless black-and-white Chihuahua who was recently left at the city shelter and was very timid, trembling and keeping its tail between its legs.

"Hi baby, do you want to be a Woof dog?" asked **Belinda Ryder**, an animal behavioral specialist who is running Woof and choosing the best canine candidates.

In a room upstairs at the shelter, Ryder played with the dog to make sure it wouldn't bite or snap at humans. The Chihuahua was deemed a good fit because it gradually grew more comfortable with Ryder, even relieving itself all over the floor.

The dog could be teamed with **Jean Green**, one of the eight supportive housing residents selected to foster the Woof puppies in the pilot phase. Over the next several weeks, she'll be taught how to care for her foster puppy and also be given extra courses in job readiness, communication, banking and health care.

Green, a San Francisco native, was homeless for six months and slept on a friend's couch or in homeless shelters until securing a unit in a new supportive housing complex for seniors in the Western Addition. She calls those months on the street "a horrible time in my life" and said she knew she wanted to participate in Woof as soon as she heard about it.

"I said, 'How could I resist?' " she recalled. "I love dogs. I can relate to a dog needing a home."

She said she's heard "lots of negative things" about Woof, and wants it known she has never panhandled in her life. "I hope that stigma isn't out there to slap us in the face," she said.

She's cared for eight dogs over the years, and a word of caution to the Woof puppy that gets teamed with Green.

"No treats!" she said. "It's just 'Good dog, good girl,' that sort of thing."

Quote of the week

"Forget about yourself. It's about them. You all ain't packing. I hope not. A lot of you seem a little old to do time."

Sululagi Palega, a Samoan leader calling on other city elders at a mayoral press conference to help get youth's guns off the streets

Heather Knight is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer and covers City Hall politics. E-mail: hknight@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@hknightsf](https://twitter.com/hknightsf)

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