



Second Judicial Circuit of Florida

March 27, 2023

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Paula Watkins @ office 850.606.4422
e-mail watkinsp@leoncountyfl.gov

Deborah Shaw @ office 850.606.4445
e-mail shawd@leoncountyfl.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WHAT: Animal Therapy in the Courts Celebration

WHEN: Friday, March 31, 2023 at 1:30 PM

WHERE: Leon County Courthouse - Courtroom 2E

SECOND JUDICIAL CIRCUIT CELEBRATES SIXTEEN YEARS OF ANIMAL THERAPY IN THE COURTS

Tallahassee, FL – In honor of sixteen years of the Second Judicial Circuit Animal Therapy in the Courts Program, the circuit will hold a celebration honoring animal therapy teams. The Second Judicial Circuit is comprised of Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty and Wakulla Counties.

The celebration set for Friday, March 31, 2023 at 1:30 PM in Courtroom 2E, Second Floor of the Leon County Courthouse, in Tallahassee will include a swearing-in ceremony for the Courthouse Therapy Teams – handlers and dogs.

Authorized by then-Chief Judge Charles A. Francis, the Second Judicial Circuit became the first court sponsored animal therapy program in Florida in August 2007. The

therapy dog teams are provided by the Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare Animal Therapy Program, at no cost to the Second Judicial Circuit. The therapy dogs were initially available to comfort and support children testifying as victims in violent crimes, and later expanded to assist children participating in dependency court proceedings, and adults as determined by the court to be in need of the service.

The first dependency animal therapy court visits statewide began in 2009 in Wakulla County as part of an initiative by Wakulla County Judge Jill Walker to have children participate in dependency court cases. Dependency proceedings involve children who have been abused or neglected, determinations of parental rights, and custody of children. Court proceedings can be extremely emotional and stressful for the parties involved. According to Walker, it is important for children to be present in court, and it is especially important for the judge to obtain as much information as possible from the children. "Numerous research studies show that petting dogs can have a calming affect by lowering levels of cortisol, a stress inducing hormone. We are taking advantage of this science. By lowering stress levels of parties coming to court, you get more complete and accurate information by having everyone able to focus on the issue at hand. It makes my job easier as the decider of fact."

The Second Judicial Circuit Courthouse Therapy Dog Program serves as a model for other jurisdictions. The program has assisted 15 of the twenty judicial circuits of the State of Florida in planning similar programs. The Second Circuit program also took the lead in drafting statewide recommendations for the use of therapy dogs in dependency courts.

To date, 86 animal therapy teams have participated in 391 court events and have provided comfort and support to countless children during 362 mass dependency court dockets. According to Chief Judge Jonathan Sjostrom, "The celebration is a way for the courts to show our appreciation to the volunteers of the TMH Animal Therapy Program and their animal partners."