

Summary of Doctoral Experiential Survey Results

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In order to better understand the benefits The Little Dog Laughed provides to its partner organizations, as well as identify any areas where improvements could be made, a survey was created and distributed to representatives of the organizations with which The Little Dog Laughed has partnered. Responses were received from Monika's House and Raphael House, two domestic violence shelters where volunteers from The Little Dog Laughed provide dog-assisted therapy services to children. In addition, feedback was received from McKay Elementary School and from a school based program called BoyStrength, which strives to prevent violence among boys ages eight through eighteen. Responses were also received from Good Neighbor Center, an organization which provides shelter to homeless families, and Trillium Family Services, which provides services to youth experiencing mental health challenges. Additionally, feedback was received from the mother of an individual adolescent who receives one-on-one dog-assisted therapy services through The Little Dog Laughed. This individual was referred to the Little Dog Laughed by Edwards School Day Treatment, run by Trillium Family Services.

The survey was designed to elicit responses that would help to illuminate the scope of the population served by The Little Dog Laughed and identify which methods have proven effective in connecting The Little Dog Laughed with partner organizations. It was also intended to help identify what concerns partner organizations have had about forming an association with a dog-assisted therapy organization of this type, and describe the ways in which these concerns have been addressed. In addition, questions were designed to determine why these organizations may have chosen to partner with The Little Dog Laughed, as opposed to other local dog-assisted therapy organizations. Additionally, specific questions were aimed at collecting information about the benefits The Little Dog Laughed has provided to its partner organizations and any changes these organizations would like to see made, in order to improve the quality of this partnership. Finally survey recipients were asked whether or not they would recommend a partnership with The Little Dog Laughed to other organizations, and specifically which other organizations they would like to see The Little Dog Laughed approach, in order to pursue a partnership.

With regard to the population served by The Little Dog Laughed, survey responses revealed that many of the children served by this organization live in shelters, often as a result of domestic violence within their homes. Others attend a Title One school where poverty rates are high, as are the rates at which families are forced to relocate, disrupting the educational and social supports on which these children rely. Still others are struggling with severe mental illness or other forms of disability. Overall, one word which was repeatedly used to describe the populations served by The Little Dog Laughed and its partner organizations was “trauma.” As stated on The Little Dog Laughed website, this organization teaches “relationship and problem-solving skills to at-risk youths through classes in positive dog training” (www.thelittledoglaughed.org). It seems clear from the responses to this survey that the children The Little

Dog Laughed serves are indeed at risk.

In order to effectively reach and serve these children it is essential for The Little Dog Laughed to identify and form connections with other local organizations who are already working with these particular populations. Survey responses indicate that this is being achieved most often through efforts on the part of Linda Keast, the director of The Little Dog Laughed, to reach out and offer her organizations services. In addition, responses indicate that once these partnerships have been formed they are often carried on despite various personnel changes at the various partner organizations. This is indicative of the efficacy of these partnerships and of the value they provide to these organizations.

When asked what initially piqued their interest and caused them to consider partnering with The Little Dog Laughed, survey recipients provided a variety of encouraging responses. One individual, representing McKay Elementary School, stated that “There is a big body of research that suggests effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy on different age groups, especially children. Besides having a calming, blood pressure and stress lowering effect, it provides opportunities for indirect teaching of social cues and skills that transfer to peer-to-peer and adult interactions.” Another respondent, representing Good Neighbor Center, stated “I was over the moon when we were contacted. I had been looking into regular therapy, especially unique play/animal/art therapy for the kids I was working with, and The Little Dog Laughed seemed like such a dream come true. It seemed like the perfect fit for our kids and that it would work well fitting into the summer program I was planning.” The respondent representing Trillium Family Services stated “We really value dog therapy here and have worked with various teams/organizations,” while the representative for BoyStrength pointed out that, because “Portland is such a dog friendly community, I wanted the boys to know how to properly/safely engage.”

Most survey recipients stated that, regardless of their reasons for considering a partnership with The Little Dog Laughed, their primary initial concern was around safety. Would the dogs and their handlers be able to engage in the therapeutic process within the space their organization was able to provide? Would the dogs be able to tolerate the behaviors of “active wiggly kids,” and what about insurance coverage for any potential dog-related injuries? Luckily all recipients felt as though their concerns were well addressed, primarily through direct and timely responses provided by Linda Keast. Linda was able to assure them that all the dogs were well trained and that insurance needs were covered by The Little Dog Laughed. She was both receptive to their questions and eager to engage in any specific training required by their organizations.

Some of the recipients stated that their organization has partnered with other dog-assisted therapy organizations as well, such as Pet Partners (formerly Delta Society). However, one recipient pointed out that “most other animal therapy that's offered locally would not have worked with our space, budget, and time constraint issues,” emphasizing the importance of having a variety of local organizations with differing strategies and approaches. It is for this very reason that The Little Dog Laughed is seeking to produce a list

of local dog-assisted therapy related resources which they can provide to any and all interested parties, in order to ensure than anyone seeking these types of resources in the local area is able to find exactly what they need.

When asked about the ways in which their partnership with The Little Dog Laughed has met, or failed to meet, their expectations, survey recipients had an abundance of overwhelmingly positive things to say. The mother of an adolescent receiving one-on-one services stated that Linda Keast and her dog Zoey have provided her daughter with something to look forward to which “helps her feel proud and successful, while also allowing her to help Zoey work through emotions that seem to resemble her emotions.” The representative for Monika's House also pointed out that the children at the shelter look forward to visits from The Little Dog Laughed every week. In addition, she emphasized that these visits help to teach the children about boundaries and communication, while providing them with positive interactions with animals that many of them have not previously experienced. The respondent representing McKay Elementary pointed out that visits from The Little Dog Laughed provide students with “positive interactions focused on skills that ensure their safety dealing with any dog, developing closer attention to behavioral cues and body language, and also insur[ing] their ability to work and train the dogs using positive reinforcement. These skills are fully transferable to peer and adult interactions.” The respondent representing Good Neighbor Center added “I think The Little Dog Laughed offered a unique way to teach important social skills and behaviors that kids in transition find really helpful. It was also a lot of fun, the kids looked forward to it every week and I loved having them so engaged every week!” Additionally, the respondent representing Raphael House pointed out that she had “also seen the group have a positive impact on some youth participants overall confidence and understanding of asserting and respecting boundaries (both their own and others).”

In order to fully understand the value The Little Dog Laughed provides to its partner organizations, survey recipients were also asked how the partnership had improved the quality of the services their organization provides. In response, the mother of the adolescent receiving one-on-one services stated that it has improved her daughter's life. The respondent representing McKay Elementary pointed out that “it provides a different way to facilitate social skills/friendship groups, combining dog-assisted sessions with regular sessions, thus ensuring transferability and practice of the skills,” while the respondent representing Good Neighbor Center emphasized that “this program does an excellent job of helping little ones learn important skills that help them heal from trauma. The program looks like fun games or information about how to train dogs, but underneath the fun was an excellent framework that helped our kids learn to regulate their emotions, set and respect boundaries, and develop perseverance, patience, and the importance of encouraging others. These skills are invaluable for kids.”

When asked about the aspect of the partnership that has been most beneficial, respondents listed the

emotional benefits provided to the children such as happiness, excitement, fun, and joy. The respondent representing Good Neighbor Center specifically mentioned how “knowledgeable, kind and sensitive to [the] shelter's needs and limitations” both Linda Keast and her fellow board member Lori Gamroth have been. While the respondent representing Raphael House pointed out how “consistent, reliable, flexible, and responsive” Linda Keast has been. In addition, the respondent representing Trillium Family Services mentioned how much she loved “the way the teams interact with [their] clients. They accept each of them where they are currently, [and] they gently encourage them.”

Survey recipients were also asked what specific changes could be made to improve the partnerships between their organizations and The Little Dog Laughed. While many respondents were unable to think of any ways in which they would like to see the partnerships improved, several pointed out that they would appreciate receiving visits from volunteers and their dogs on a more frequent basis throughout the year. In addition, the representative from BoyStrength suggested that having The Little Dog Laughed bring even more dogs to visit the children might help them to serve even larger class numbers. Overall the feedback indicated that, rather than having any specific concerns about the partnerships, The Little Dog Laughed's partner organizations would simply like to see their partnerships expand to encompass more visits from more dogs. When asked whether or not they would recommend that other organizations partner with The Little Dog Laughed the respondents unanimously agreed that they would. In particular, respondents recommended that The Little Dog Laughed pursue partnerships with other schools, family shelters, and agencies which provide services to both youth and their families.

On the whole, the feedback received through the distribution of this survey was extremely positive. Results indicated that the organizations partnering with The Little Dog Laughed have been extremely satisfied with the services their clients have received. In addition, several respondents demonstrated a clear understanding of the multi-layered nature of these services and the deeper benefits this type of dog-assisted therapy program can provide. Specifically, these benefits include teaching children valuable social and emotional skills which can be applied to their interpersonal relationships, not just their interactions with canines. Moving forward, this survey indicates that The Little Dog Laughed has an opportunity to expand the services they provide to their current partner organizations, in addition to exploring new opportunity and organizations where their service may be needed.