Justice Heals: Human-Animal Interventions for Survivors of Sexual Assault

Cohort:
2019-2022

Team Members:
Megan Spedoske, LMSW
Tana Fedewa, LMSW
Marie Hopfensperger, BS, DVM

Location:
East Lansing, Michigan

Focus Areas:
Behavioral and Mental Health
One Health
Violence & Trauma

Wicked Problem Description

While the Michigan State University (MSU) community has been particularly devastated by notorious sexual misconduct, U.S. campus statistics reflect a national crisis of sexual assault. One in five women and one in 16 men experience sexual violence during their college careers. Survivors of sexual crimes experience greater risks for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been successfully incorporated into sexual trauma treatment with a reported decrease in associated symptoms. Working with shelter dogs in particular may lead to improved outcomes for humans, as trauma survivors may empathize with shelter dogs perceived historical trauma. Concurrently, the dogs may experience enrichment and stress reduction. Thus, creating a "One Welfare" experience, an additional therapeutic option, and a sense of community to foster a Culture of Health.

Project Strategies

Current Actions

- Justice Heals first survivor cohort was completed in August 2021, and a focus group was facilitated by a third-party program evaluator to obtain essential feedback to inform

future programming. The team is in the process of revising and refining the curriculum and structure, as well as streamlining intake to facilitate continuity of care.

- Our team of animal behavior experts hypothesized that dogs exhibiting high levels of empathy, impulse control, frustration tolerance, social cognition, curiosity, and resilience would be capable of and comfortable during AAT. Data collection was completed in June 2021. Data analysis is currently ongoing to determine which hypothesized attributes were most predictive of partnerships that yielded positive experiences for both canine and human participants.
- Our team is developing a survey to determine if trauma history correlates with a person's level of comfort working with shelter dogs and/or is related to their underlying motivation for engagement.

Future Actions

- The team plans to continue current programming and explore additional modalities, such as individual AAT, and broadening its scope to include other types of trauma, including vicarious trauma experienced by animal shelter staff.
  - Justice Heals will run a 4-week group AAT curriculum for survivors of sexual trauma to begin in mid-January or early-February 2022 with the potential for running a spring break intensive March 7-11, 2022.
  - Developing individual therapy options for sexual trauma survivors during spring semester 2022.
  - There is the potential for running the curriculum for broader trauma populations and offering individual AAT during spring-summer 2022.
  - Given the vicarious trauma experienced by animal shelter staff, as well as their possible historical trauma, Justice Heals plans to expand to include animal shelter staff programing during spring-summer 2022.
- Develop post-session surveys (4-question) in collaboration with Carol Barrett, PhD of Quality and Impact Data Solutions.
- The team plans to create a 501(c)(3) to house Justice Heals programming long-term.
- The team plans to refine and clarify its curriculum manual and WPIP toolkit to allow replication of programming in other communities and populations. By the end of 2021, the team anticipates having a completed manual for the Justice Heals curriculum expanded to include on other trauma types besides sexual trauma and to include a special section for vicarious trauma specific to animal shelter staff.
  - During November-December 2021, our animal behavior team will work with our first cohort alumni to evaluate options to optimize welfare and function for shelter dogs in the group setting.
- Publication of 2021 pilot and survey projects will be completed by May 2022, concurrent to thesis defense of the master's student mentored by Drs. Hopfensperger and Jacobs.

- The team plants to develop and support a Justice Heals alumni network for survivor driven animal assisted interactions and volunteerism. During summer 2022, there will be a focus on developing this alumni network and ensuring continuity of care.

Outcomes

Completed Outcomes

- Our interdisciplinary team developed a skills-based AAT curriculum with parallel curriculum for human and canine participants. A 6-week, 2-person pilot cohort was completed in August 2021, and a participant focus group was facilitate by a third-party program evaluator in September 2021.
- Megan Spedoske has completed Center for Human Animal Interventions (CHAI) certificate program at Oakland University.
- Our team of animal behaviors experts completed a simulated AAT project in June 2021. The aims of this project were: 1) determine if we could identify shelter dogs who were well-suited for and comfortable during AAT and 2) evaluate human participant experiences to ensure "One Welfare" programming in which both dogs and humans were benefitting. Preliminary data suggests that all human participants and 83% of shelter dog participants had positive experiences; additional supportive physiologic data for the dogs is currently being analyzed.
- A survey was completed in summer 2021 to evaluate you trauma history and preference in age, size, and other physical characteristics of AAT partner dogs. Unlike preference for adoption of dogs, preliminary data suggests that regardless of trauma history people do not have significant preferences regarding partner dogs for AAT.
- Social media pages have been created and are being curated through the MSU Center for Survivors.
  - Instagram: justiceheals_msu
  - Twitter @JusticeHealsMSU
  - Facebook @JusticeHeals
  - Website: https://centerforsurvivors.msu.edu/programs/justice-heals

Anticipated Future Outcomes

- The Justice Heals team has developed a skills-based, group AAT curriculum, and preliminary data suggests that experiences of human and shelter dogs has been positive, as intended for mutually beneficial "One Welfare" programming.
- Future outcomes include:
  - Offering another modality for trauma survivors, which may engage survivors who may not otherwise seek traditional treatment and/or survivors who are in a further stage of healing.
  - Increase numbers of survivors and dogs served by Justice Heals, as well as expand programming for other trauma types, including vicarious trauma.
  - Create enrichment opportunities, enhance welfare, and increase access to behavioral healthcare for shelter dogs

○ Refine model and disseminate information, so programming can be replicated in other communities.

Timeline - (for the remaining fellowship time period)

Year Three
- December 2021: Compete Justice Heals program manul.
- January-March 2022: Run 4-week group AAT cohort(s) plus/minus spring break intensive and individual AAT.
- April-May 2022: Expand populations to serve broader trauma scope, including vicarious trauma in animal shelter staff.
- May 2022: Publish data from pilot projects and have Justice Heals established as a 501(c)(3).
- Summer 2022: Focus on Justice Heals alumni network and future programming through non-profit.

Partnerships - (including community partnerships, extended team members, etc.)

- Our team has an ongoing partnership with Ingham County Animal Control & Shelter (ICACS) to work with the dogs from ICACS and where Justice Heals runs programming currently.
- Justice Heals is grateful for the pro-bono program evaluation support from Carol Barrett, PhD of Quality and Impact Data Solutions.
- Dr. Hopfensperger continues collaboration with Dr. Jacquelyn Jacobs from the MSU Animal Sciences department. Drs. Hopfensperger and Jacobs are mentoring Jacqueline Naud, whose Master's thesis is based upon Justice Heals' programming and outcomes. Ms. Naud will defend her these in May 2022.
- We continue to work in concert with the MSU Center for Survivors; however, are also considering the creation of Justice Heals as an independent non-profit to serve a broader population of trauma and the community at large beyond the campus community.

Evaluation Strategies and any findings so far

- Two focus groups have been facilitated by Carol Barrett, PhD of Quality and Impact Data Solutions to obtain meaningful feedback of programming.
- Human Animal Interaction Scale was utilized to infer the experiences of dogs during simulated and actual AAT sessions. Preliminary data suggests that most shelter dog participants (83% during simulated AAT and 80% during actual AAT) had positive experiences during sessions.
- Salivary oxytocin and heart rate variability (Polar Monitor H-10) are physiologic markers utilized to assess experiences of shelter dogs during AAT. Data is currently being analyzed.

- Pre- and post-session surveys were utilized during simulated-AAT pilot project. We utilized the mood and stress feelings scales, as well as overall evaluation of experience. All human participants reported positive experiences with simulated-AAT and there were statistically significant improvements in mood and stress post-sessions as compared to baseline.

Contact Person Information

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