

Courthouse Dogs Expand to Chile

“We need dogs like these in Chile,” said Seattle Police Department videographer Cesar Hidalgo-Landeros. It was 2007, and Cesar and I were in the middle of editing a training video about courthouse dogs professionally trained canines who provide crime victims with emotional support during the investigation and prosecution stages. We had just watched a film clip of a five-year-old girl telling courthouse dog Stilson how she had been sexually abused.

At the time, I had concerns about the U.S. legal system embracing the idea of dogs participating in forensic interviews and appearing in the courtroom; I couldn't imagine Chile being receptive to the idea. The deadline for our video production loomed, so we dropped the discussion and got back to work.

Two years later, my consulting partner, Celeste Walsen, DVM, and I gave a presentation on our “Courthouse Dogs” program at an Assistance Dogs International conference. One of the first questions came from a young woman in the back of the auditorium, who wanted to know if we could come to her country to tell people about this concept. Celeste and I love to travel, so I said, “Sure,” and then thought to ask where she lived. She said she was from Santiago, Chile.

Months went by, and I was caught up in my job as a deputy prosecuting attorney. Then came the invitation. The young woman whose request we



Dog trainers from Bocalán Confiar with director, Cecilia Marré, second from left (front row); detectives and counselors from PDI (back row). Santiago, Chile.

ABOUT COURTHOUSE DOGS:

Trained and placed by a nonprofit service dog organization accredited by Assistance Dogs International, these assistance dogs are specifically selected for their very calm, unflappable demeanor. It usually takes about two years of socialization and training to prepare a dog for this type of work.

had so casually accepted, Cecilia Marré, turned out to be the director of Chile's *Corporación Bocalán Confiar* (bocalanconfiar.cl), and in June 2009, she wrote with a formal appeal for assistance. I rushed into Cesar's studio and told him

about Cecilia's invitation. I also said that this remarkable coincidence meant that he had to travel with us. To persuade him, I added that his work with the Seattle Police Department might make the idea of using dogs with victims more acceptable to the Chilean law-enforcement officers who investigate such crimes. Cesar readily agreed to accompany us, and also offered to help with translating our presentations to Chilean government officials.

To prepare, I studied up on Chile's criminal justice system, learning that the country had only recently adopted the adversarial model long utilized in the U.S., and that Chileans are passionate about implementing trial

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procedures that assure justice for everyone. In the meantime, Cesar entered a three-minute YouTube video, “Dogs in the Courthouse,” in a contest sponsored by the Washington State Bar Association to find the short film that best demonstrated a Northwest perspective on “Justice for All.” Cesar said that if he won, he would donate any prize money he received to Bocalán Confiar to help them promote a courthouse dogs program. In September, just two days before our departure for Chile, Cesar learned that he had won both the judges’ and the People’s Choice awards!

After a long flight, we arrived in Santiago and were greeted by customs dogs sniffing luggage for fruits and vegetables. To our surprise, these Labradors were working off-lead, with their handlers standing by, monitoring their behavior. As the dogs went about their business, they also accepted a few pats from the passengers. What a lovely introduction to the country this was.

Cecilia picked us up, and asked if we would be interested in seeing therapy dogs from Bocalán Confiar work with a physical therapist treating a disabled child. On our way to the facility, she told us that in Chile, veterinary students sometimes become certified dog handlers and assist physical therapists. We also learned that in some countries, the term “therapy dog” has a different meaning than it does in the U.S. In South America and Europe, for example, therapy dogs are what we call professionally trained assistance dogs.

When we arrived at the clinic, we saw Alejandra Santelices and her Labrador Retriever, Peseta, in a cheerful room, working with a physical therapist and a little girl. Peseta sat patiently across a table from the child, who had a bowl of dog kibble in front of her. She painstakingly dipped a spoon into the bowl, filled it with kibble and lifted it to Peseta’s mouth. She was delighted when Peseta ate delicately from the spoon.

Our next meetings were with the family-crime investigation unit of the *Policía de Investigaciones de Chile* (PDI) and *Servicio Nacional de Menores* (SENAME)

of the Ministry of Justice, a child sexual abuse treatment organization, to discuss their interest in implementing a courthouse dogs program. Two detectives picked us up, and we had an exciting ride through an assortment of neighborhoods to their headquarters. As we were escorted into the building, we saw a formal line of police officials waiting to greet us. Cesar had told us that in Chile, people air-kiss one another on the right cheek, but it was still a surprise to be greeted by these distinguished gentlemen this way.

Once the salutations were over, we made our first presentation to a group of about 10 high-ranking police officials. With Cesar and Cecilia acting as translators, we explained how professionally trained assistance dogs could help children and their families during the investigation and prosecution of sexual-assault crimes. It was very hard to read their expressions—we couldn’t tell if they thought we were brilliant or crazy. But when Cesar broke out Seattle Police Department sweatshirts and hats, their demeanor changed, and we knew we had at least connected on that level.

Our meeting with the SENAME staff was entirely different. Here, forensic interviewers, a family court judge and therapeutic counselors made up the audience, and within minutes, it was clear they were ready to try anything to assist children and their families through this difficult process. We were told that there is a great deal of pressure to keep intrafamily sexual abuse secret, especially if reporting it meant that the father would be removed from the home. The mothers’ intentions are good, but they can easily become frustrated with the prolonged process. Not only are they usually unable to support their families by themselves, they see that their abused children begin to feel revictimized by having to repeatedly describe what happened to them. Cases were often dismissed for these reasons and, even worse, the children were not receiving the therapeutic counseling they needed to recover from their experiences. Maybe the dogs could make a difference.

To our delight, we were invited to a second meeting with the PDI investigators, at which the entire staff was present. This time there were smiles, and the detectives were on their knees hugging the dog Cecilia had brought with her. Apparently, they thought we were more brilliant than crazy. In a leap of faith, the police had decided to work with Bocalán Confiar assistance dogs and SENAME to make a Chilean courthouse dogs program a reality. The following day, Santiago television stations and newspapers covered Chile's decision to begin a courthouse dogs program. Suddenly, the issue of child sexual abuse was big news, and this innovative approach demonstrated that the government was willing to do all it could to address the problem.

Epilogue

Within weeks of our return to the U.S., we learned that, due to Cecilia's efforts, the Bayer Corporation in Chile had offered to fund the courthouse dogs program. In addition, the Ministry of Justice wanted six Bocalán Confiar assistance dogs to begin training with the police and counselors by January 2010. Cecilia, who had to work fast to get this started, asked *Fundación Bocalán* (bocalan.es), the parent organization

in Spain that supports Chile's program, to lend a hand with additional dogs and training expertise. Teo Mariscal, director of *Fundación Bocalán*, enthusiastically agreed to help out, traveling to Chile with three dogs and assisting with the training. Courthouse Dogs, a.k.a. *Perros de Asistencia Judicial*, is now active in Chile and making a difference.

What a lesson in humility! I had thought that Chileans were unlikely to be receptive to this idea, but not only were they interested, they established and funded a national program faster than has been done in our country. Now, we are lagging behind.

Recently, Teo Mariscal asked if we would be interested in helping him establish a similar program in Colombia. "Sure," we said. "We love to travel!" Stay tuned... **B**

Ellen O'Neill-Stephens, a senior deputy prosecuting attorney in Seattle, Wash., and Celeste Walsen, DVM, co-founded Courthouse Dogs LLC in 2008. courthouse dogs.com

GO ONLINE

Bark contributing editor Rebecca Wallick wrote about Seattle's Courthouse Dogs program in 2007; read the story here: thebark.com/content/dogs-courtroom. Cesar's prize-winning video can be viewed at youtube.com/watch?v=IPVdie1-Jdc.



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