



COLORADO ORGANIZATION
for VICTIM ASSISTANCE
building solutions, leading change.

Vote YES on House Bill 1220 (formerly HB1144)

Sponsored by Representative Sullivan, concerning allowing a court facility dog to accompany individuals during judicial proceedings.

Testifying in court proceedings for most witnesses is a stressful proposition. When the witness is a victim of sexual abuse or another violent crime, testifying means the witness will actually have to recall that traumatic event. It has been demonstrated that a well-trained dog can alleviate stress in many different circumstances. Using a well-trained courthouse facility dog in the courtroom is a logical step forward and is less intrusive and prejudicial than several other forms of accommodation for witnesses (both prosecution AND defense witnesses).

House Bill 1220 will:

- **give clear guidance to the judiciary as to when the legislature believes the use of a courthouse facility dog may be used;**
- **create standards for the use of dogs in court; and**
- **establish a threshold for the minimum qualifications of any dogs sought to be used in a courtroom.**

Differences between HB1144 and HB1220:

- **HB1220 changes the standard a judge must use in determining whether to allow a court facility dog to accompany a witness**
- **HB1220 clarifies any witnesses, not just children, can be accompanied by a court facility dog**
- **HB1220 clarifies the use of a court facility dog may be allowed during all criminal proceedings, not just during trial**

Dogs have partnered with humans throughout history to do jobs more efficiently. Herding cattle and sheep, pulling sleds, hunting, retrieving, scenting, tracking and guarding homes. Dogs have also been successfully incorporated in the military and law enforcement. Dogs assist human beings with disabilities daily in ways that allow them to live their life more independently. Dogs are even being used in the medical field for detection of illness and response to medical emergencies like diabetes or seizures. The right dog for the right job is crucial. For example, a bloodhound would not be good as a sled dog. Not every dog should be in the legal system.

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Well trained dogs can make the legal system more efficient:

Studies show that physiological changes happen within the human body within minutes of interacting with a safe dog. The body releases oxytocin also known as the “nursing hormone”. This hormone creates feelings of optimism, safety and well-being. Interaction with a safe dog also decreases cortisol and other stress hormones in the body. Studies included in “Courthouse Dog Statutes and Research”.

Participating in the legal process (e.g., forensic interviews, courtroom proceedings etc.) is one of the most stressful events a person may experience. The presence of an appropriately trained dog can help to reduce the stress and anxiety associated with the experience subsequently improving the efficiency and quality of the legal process. A person feeling less anxious and safe is better able to answer questions asked in an interview or court setting.

A courthouse facility dog is meant to benefit everyone and the stressors that come with working or being in the legal system. This means prosecution witnesses & staff, defense witnesses & staff and even those at the courthouse.

There are several goals in implementing dogs in the legal system process and specifically the courts:

- Improve the approach and soften the interaction of the professionals in the legal system with people that become a part of the system as a result of criminal acts and subsequently obtaining better information.
- Implement a trauma informed approach to investigation and prosecution of crime by creating a more compassionate environment for communication that enables staff in the legal system to accomplish their work in a more positive, efficient and constructive manner.
- Incorporate highly trained dogs that can provide unmatched emotional support to accomplish these goals.

Pella was the first Courthouse Facility Dog in Colorado. She started working May 2012.

As of December 2018 Pella has been approved to accompany witnesses on the stand in 24 separate cases, some with more than one witness, in 4 different county courthouses. 16 of these cases were actual trials in front of a jury. 4 of these trials returned not guilty verdicts; one where the jury saw Pella and knew of her presence with the victim during testimony. One of these cases Pella was on the stand with a juror during a post-conviction hearing.

As of January 18, 2019 there are 195 dogs in 39 states working as Courthouse Facility Dogs. There are currently 6 similar dogs in Colorado including Pella.

Arizona, Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Virginia all have statutes that allow the use of a Courthouse Facility Dog.

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