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Contact: mediainquiry@acs.nyc.gov

AS PART OF AN ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES & A RISING GROUND PROGRAM, YOUTH INVOLVED IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM BEING TAUGHT HOW TO TRAIN DOGS TO BECOME CERTIFIED THERAPY ANIMALS

The Paid Vocational Program Teaches At-Risk NYC Youth New Skills All While Promoting Positive Behavioral Changes; Training Dogs to Be Therapy Animals Will Provide Critical Support to Community At-Large

NEW YORK, NY – More than a dozen teenagers involved in the New York City juvenile justice system are being taught how to train dogs to become certified therapy animals, reports the NYC Administration Children's Services (ACS) and its provider partner, Rising Ground. The paid vocational program aims to promote positive behavioral changes among at-risk youth so that they can successfully transition back into their communities.

"Youth involved in the juvenile justice system need access to services and programs designed to promote rehabilitation, positive behavior changes and successful re-entry into the community," **said ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell**. "Rising Ground's dog training program has provided at-risk youth with new skills and work experience, all while promoting positive behavioral changes. This is just one of the many different examples that show how Close to Home has dramatically changed our approach to working with juvenile justice involved youth in New York City."

"Rising Ground's dog training program has provided young people from all walks of life the opportunity to learn how to practice patience and explore what a career in dog training might be like. It's about exposing our youth to different things and equipping them with essential professional skills that will help them build a successful future. I am glad that through this interagency collaboration, DYCD's Summer Youth Employment Program is reaching and positively impacting more young people who wouldn't otherwise have access to paying jobs and career exploration," **said DYCD Commissioner Bill Chong**.

According to Lisa Crook, Rising Ground's Vice President of Justice for Youth and Families: "What is beautiful about training therapy dogs is that it has multiple benefits for our youth. Not only do the juveniles learn to be responsible for another being and get a taste of what a career in dog-training might be like, they also get all the therapeutic benefits animals have to offer."

As part of the dog training program, approximately a dozen at-risk youth had the opportunity to work with a certified master dog trainer at Backcountry K-9 Training. The youth were taught how to train dogs to become certified therapy animals. The dogs included: Simon (yorkie), Murphy (vizsla) and Jay Mo (pitbull mix).

The youth participating in the program currently reside in Close to Home residences operated by Rising Ground. Close to Home is a juvenile justice reform initiative that has allowed New York City youth who have been adjudicated juvenile delinquents to be placed in residential care with ACS near their home communities. ACS partners with non-profit agencies, like Rising Ground, to deliver strengths-based programs that support their treatment and help them transition back into their communities.

The purpose of the dog training program is two-fold. First, the paid work experience provides the youth with new skills that can be leveraged when leaving Close to Home and entering the workforce. Second, the program aims to promote positive behavioral changes that will help them transition into productive adults. Specifically, research suggests that the act of petting animals releases an automatic relaxation response and can lower anxiety, provide comfort, and reduce loneliness. "It's an avenue where we can get the kids to project their emotions onto the animals. We're able to get through to them therapeutically a lot quicker," Crook said.

The dog training program is one of many programs and services provided to youth in Close to Home. ACS is continuously working to improve and expand programs that foster social and cognitive skill development, provide individualized educational or vocational support and address the immediate needs of youth to avert community violence and cyclical justice system involvement.

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