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The New York City Department of Correction

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**New Adolescent Programming Teaches Teens to Train Rescued Shelter Dogs**

***Multi-Purpose Canine Training Program Instills Responsibility in Adolescent Inmates and Finds Homes for Dogs***

East Elmhurst, N.Y. – New York City Department of Correction (DOC) Commissioner Joe Ponte today announced the second cycle of a program that enables adolescent inmates at Rikers Island’s Robert N. Davoren Center (RNDC) to learn how to train, nurture and discipline rescued shelter dogs. The program is run in partnership with Animal Care & Control of NYC (AC&C) and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

As part of DOC’s 14-point anti-violence initiative, this program represents one of the department’s new adolescent programming opportunities, which are designed to reduce inmate idleness and foster individual responsibility. The program has been modeled after a number of successful canine training programs in correctional settings in several states across the country with various populations, including New York State prison Bedford Hills, Washington State, and California. This program is a prime example of the kind of age-appropriate rehabilitation that Commissioner Ponte, a noted reformer, is working to institute throughout DOC to lessen violence and promote better inmate outcomes.

“This program teaches adolescents how to be responsible and nurturing, so they can be better members of their communities after they leave our custody,” **Commissioner Ponte** said. “As DOC enacts a comprehensive program of meaningful reform to move the Department toward a culture of safety, this program shows how city agencies can partner with a community group to help adolescents.”

While the adolescents teach the dogs the commands and skills the dogs need to make them attractive candidates for adoption, they themselves learn such important civic and social skills as empathy, goal-setting, delayed gratification, patience, perseverance, and kindness. The adolescents learn to positively contribute to the community through dedication and hard work.

In the program, nicknamed Rikers Rovers, the adolescents in an RNDC housing area must take full responsibility for the dog for nine weeks, walking, feeding, and teaching the animal to perform commands. The adolescents also keep a log of these activities. After the nine weeks, the dog can be adopted by a family or an individual.

“A boy and his dog is an age-old pairing, and a relationship which teaches critical life skills to a young person—we are helping our adolescents build positive new habits that will stay with them even after they leave Rikers,” said **Winette Saunders, DOC’s Deputy Commissioner for Youth Offender Programming.**

Fourteen adolescents completed the program with an initial dog, Lily, who was subsequently adopted. The program, which is beginning its second cycle, is now working with Ace, a black Labrador mix who is a year old and has been living at RNDC.

“We are pleased to be a part of this adolescent canine training program by offering these dogs to the Department of Correction,” said **AC&C Executive Director Risa Weinstock.** “As one of the largest animal welfare organizations in the country, we are dedicated to rescuing and finding homes for dogs.”

Animal Care & Control of NYC, a non-profit group, selects the dogs from its shelters, provides food and equipment for the animal, training for the adolescents and veterinary care. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene provides the animal-care-and-handling certification for the participants.

### **About the New York City Department of Correction**

The New York City Department of Correction (DOC) manages the jail system for New York City. It operates Rikers Island, which houses 10 individual facilities, four borough-based jails and two hospital wards, as well as court pens in all five boroughs. In FY 2014, DOC had 77,141 admissions involving 56,218 individuals.

Its Average Daily Population is approximately 11,400, over 80 percent of whom are housed on Rikers Island. Most of the inmates in DOC custody are being detained pending the resolution of charges against them; approximately 15 percent are city-sentenced inmates who are serving sentences of one year or less.

### **About Animal Care & Control of NYC**

Animal Care & Control of NYC (AC&C) is one of the largest animal welfare organizations in the country, taking in more than 30,000 animals each year. AC&C is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that rescues, cares for and finds loving homes for animals throughout the five boroughs. AC&C has a contract with the City of New York to be an open-admissions organization, which means it never turns away any homeless, abandoned, injured or sick animal in need of help, including cats, dogs, rabbits, small mammals, reptiles, birds, farm animals and wildlife.

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