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Dogs give abuse victims comfort in trying times Andrea Lockhart knew firsthand of the lift only a pooch could provide.

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The 10-year-old girl began crying hysterically when she had to testify in a Polk County courtroom in front of the man who later would be convicted of sexually abusing her.

Victim advocate Andrea Lockhart said she and a prosecutor tried to console the girl during a short recess.

But the two adults were pushed out of the way by another figure -- one with four legs, a shiny brown and white coat, and a mouth that could engulf your hand.

"Duke literally nudged us out of the way to get to her," Lockhart said.

No one told Duke -- a 3-year-old smooth-coat collie -- to wedge his way to the child.

"It was definitely all on Duke that he made his presence known," Lockhart said.

"They always go exactly to who needs them."

Duke is a member of FLA Four Legged Advocates, an organization Lockhart created more than a year ago to help children and teens victimized by sexual abuse or domestic violence get through Florida's legal system.

The Winter Haven-based group, comprising Lockhart, her mother and a few other adults, is thought to be the first in the nation to use trained service dogs to accompany and support young victims through the criminal-justice process.

A victim advocate and dog attend all court appearances and interviews with the child that involve law enforcement, with the hope that the dog can help the child feel safe and comforted.

Despite its short time in operation, detectives said FLA FLA already has proven successful with their cases.

"[The dogs] got the children to open up and talk to us," said Polk County sheriff's Lt. Jamie Rudd.

Lockhart said of the case involving the 10-year-old girl, in which the suspect was found guilty: "She hugged [the collie], and it kind of made her giggle. It gave her enough to get through."

State Attorney Jerry Hill said if the dogs are used appropriately, the organization can grow and gain acceptance in legal proceedings.

"I think it holds much promise," Hill said.

Dr. Sandra B. Barker, director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University, said Lockhart's group is using animal-assisted therapy in a new, creative way.



Duke, Squiggly and Gator (left to right) help Angie Hibbard, Andrea Lockhart and Kim Lockhart as canine partners as they work as children's advocates. (ED SACKETT, ORLANDO SENTINEL)

"I think it's wonderful," she said.

Barker said dogs are used in research at VCU Medical Center that has shown that animals can reduce anxiety and fear in patients.

"What our patients tell us . . . it makes them feel safe. It makes them feel calm," she said.

And dogs also provide a distraction, Barker said.

"They aren't thinking about their medical treatment. They're not thinking about being a victim. They're just in the moment being with the dog," she said.

Barker and Lockhart said they don't know how the dogs know which person in a group is in pain or stress. But the dogs sense it.

"They know which one to go to -- the victim," said Angie Hibbard, an advocate who works with Lockhart.

But the dogs aren't just there for the victimized children.

Michelle, a mother of a girl who was molested, said Lockhart and the dogs provided her with an invaluable service.

"I really had no idea what was going on," said Michelle, whose last name is not being published to protect the identity of her daughter. "I needed somebody to help me get through all this stuff. Andrea and her mother sat down with me. They went over everything."

But having the dogs by her side was also a stress reliever, Michelle said.

"I really believe truly that the dogs make the biggest comfort. It helps you calm down. It makes you feel better," she said.

Lockhart knows firsthand the calming effect dogs can have when going through painful experiences: She too was the victim of a sex crime and found comfort in a strong connection with her dog.

Lockhart, now 24, wanted to turn her experience into something positive and help provide a source of support she didn't have when going through the legal system.

She graduated from the University of Central Florida with bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice, and worked as a sexual-assault counselor in Pasco County.

Lockhart first adopted Squiggly, a certified service dog, and used the golden retriever-Labrador mix with the victims she worked with in Pasco County.

"I knew it was going to help," she said.

"I had no idea how much it was really going to help."

Lockhart quit her job in 2005 and now devotes her time to FLA FLA.

She feels so passionately about the organization that she has been working for close to nothing.

The group has received a few grants and donations, but a majority of that money goes toward overhead costs and caring for the dogs, she said.

"I'm not doing this for me," Lockhart said.

"I love what I do."

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