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CMCF Incarcerated Veterans Give Back in State's First Prison Service Dog Program

PEARL — The chance for incarcerated individuals to give back to a community from inside prison is rare. For the 10 incarcerated veterans training six puppies to become full public-access service dogs for disabled veterans, giving back has become a daily mission at the state prison in Rankin County.

The Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in Pearl, home to the statewide incarcerated veterans' program, has partnered with Iowa-based Retrieving Freedom, Inc. (RFI) to create the state's first prison service dog training program at no cost to the state.

“Having dogs in prison is an exceptional experience for us,” said incarcerated veteran Robert Franklin, who serves as the training program unit leader. “Learning how to professionally train dogs is a job skill none of us ever expected to develop, and knowing what we do here with these dogs is a way to give back to those men and women physically or mentally wounded in service to our country is both humbling and gratifying. However, we often wonder who is ultimately benefiting most from this program — the disabled veterans who receive our dogs or us, the incarcerated veterans training our dogs.”

The truth is, the dogs benefit both communities.

Research shows that prison dog programs serve to better socialize incarcerated individuals, raise their self-esteem, and give them a sense of responsibility. Service dogs improve the lives of veterans whose transition back to everyday civilian life can be difficult and often more demanding when dealing with life-changing injuries or the anger, nightmares, panic attacks, and flashbacks associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

“I am pleased to see the partnership between our veterans’ program and Retrieving Freedom,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “This program is a positive for all involved and worthy of recognition as we observe Veterans’ Day.”

RFI’s mission is to train and provide service dogs for wounded veterans and children with autism so that they are allowed more independence in their lives. Currently, RFI has 63 dogs in training including the six at CMCF.

“I am extremely pleased with the level of professionalism that has developed with the incarcerated veterans within the CMCF program,” said RFI Executive Director Mike Lederle. “Every time I visit the program at Pearl, I am amazed that their level of commitment and the level of training they are giving our dogs. The result has been beyond our expectations.”

According to Lederle, of the 163 dogs that have entered training, 83 full public-access service dogs have been placed — 42 have been for veterans, 29 for children with autism, six as Diabetic Alert Dogs, a program that has been discontinued, three for facility dogs, and three for mobility assistance placements.

Not all dogs who go through RFI training pass the public-access standards. These dogs become companion dogs for veterans or others who do not need public access, therapy dogs in hospital or school settings, or hunting dogs.

It costs about \$25,000 to train a certified full public-access service dog. RFI breeds and raises both Labrador Retrievers and Gold Retrievers. Recipients are selected through a free application process.

The incarcerated veterans’ program at CMCF is in its third year. The program provides 30 hours of instruction and job-skill development programming each week. Its primary goal is to provide assistance with employment and to reduce recidivism. Since its inception in 2016, the program has served 126 incarcerated veterans, and of the 58 participants who have been released, 46 have jobs, and only one has returned to prison.

For more information about the CMCF service dog training program, contact Retrieving Freedom at [\(319\) 505-5949](tel:3195055949) or go to www.retrievingfreedom.org.