

## VICTIM SUPPORT DOG

### *A first in France*

France's first victim support dog program was introduced in Cahors, France in March 2019 by public prosecutor Frédéric Almendros. The initiative was developed with the assistance of the Adrienne & Pierre Sommer Foundation, Handi'Chiens (service dog training), and members of the French justice system. The pilot program is based on successful North American initiatives of similar kind.

#### WHAT IS A VICTIM SUPPORT DOG?

It is a service dog that has been trained to provide alleged victims of crime, especially children, with moral and emotional support during the investigation and prosecution of crimes and other legal proceedings. Victim support dogs can be recognized by their blue harness.

#### WHAT KIND OF TRAINING HAS FRANCE'S FIRST VICTIM SUPPORT DOG RECEIVED?

The dog, Lol, was specially chosen by Handi'Chiens, France's principal service dog training organization, for his unshakable calm, relaxed manner, and exceptionally empathic attitude toward people. Pre-trained by a host family from the age of 2 to 18 months, he completed his training over 6 more months at Handi'Chiens in Alençon, France and learned to carry out 52 different tasks. "For example, Lol learned to initiate contact with a person, to gauge his or her emotional state, and to stay still for hours at a time so as not to disturb any official proceeding," explains trainer Florian Auffret.

#### HOW CAN A SUPPORT DOG HELP ALLEGED VICTIMS?

A victim support dog is a neutral, entirely non-judgmental presence. This type of dog serves as a confidant and enables alleged victims to more easily verbalize the facts involved in their case. A support dog also helps to relieve the stress that generally emerges during police questioning.

American studies have shown that the presence of a support dog can help lower a person's heart rate and increase the release of oxytocin (the "love" hormone).

#### WHEN DOES A VICTIM SUPPORT DOG'S MISSION BEGIN AND END?

The dog can be involved at any point of the judiciary process, from the time an alleged victim makes a first statement to the police, all the way through sentencing. If a conviction is appealed and a victim has to return to court, his or her request for the presence of the support dog should once again be honored.

#### WHERE TO INVOLVE VICTIM SUPPORT DOGS: CRIMINAL OFFENSES

Attempted homicide, rape, or sexual assault of a minor under age 15.

Domestic violence inflicted on spouse, partner, minor or other vulnerable person resulting in an incapacity to work for over 8 days.

As support for children aged 5 to 13 who are called upon as witnesses in domestic violence cases, but solely during investigation and judicial inquiry.

#### WHERE TO INVOLVE VICTIM SUPPORT DOGS: COURT PROCEEDINGS

Criminal procedures or *flagrante delicto*, preliminary court hearings, judicial inquiries. Not included are expedited procedures such as summary trials or trials based on prior recognition of guilt.

#### WHO CAN REQUEST A VICTIM SUPPORT DOG?

- The plaintiff, at any stage of the judiciary process
- A representative of a victim support organization such as A.L.A.V.I – France Victimes 46, with the agreement of the plaintiff or his or her legal guardian
- An investigator, prosecutor, investigating judge, or plaintiff's lawyer, with the agreement of the public prosecutor.

#### WHERE DOES THE VICTIM SUPPORT DOG LIVE?

Lol lives at the fire station in Cahors (SDIS 46).

#### WHO ARE THE DOG'S DESIGNATED HANDLERS?

Seven specially-trained volunteer firefighters who have committed to taking the dog to see victims as needed, to ensuring his daily training exercises, and to seeing to his physical and moral wellbeing. "Lol has been trained to absorb people's emotions, but he shouldn't suffer from this job," says Handi'Chiens educator Florian Auffret. "For this reason, handlers, investigators, and some professionals from the victim support organization (A.L.A.V.I – France Victimes 46) have learned to detect any signs of suffering (i.e., weight gain or loss, unusual excitement, stress).

Colonel Bernard Tachet des Combes, director of the Lot County Fire Department (SDIS 46) "Lol has improved the atmosphere at the fire station, and his soothing presence helps firefighters when they have returned from a tough mission."

#### The intervention process

The dog is never imposed. When the prosecution has agreed to its presence and a hearing date has been set, the public prosecutor may request the dog's presence.

■ **Before judicial action:** The dog's handler (a fire fighter) introduces the dog to the victim to ensure they are both comfortable. A representative from the victim support organization (A.L.A.V.I – France Victimes 46) and the case investigator are present.

■ **During judicial action :** The dog remains with the victim. The handler leaves the room but remains available for the judge or investigator to call in if need be to see to the dog's wellbeing. A victim support person (A.L.A.V.I – France Victimes 46) watches proceedings on a monitor in another room and waits for the victim.

■ **After judicial action:** The handler picks up the dog, allows him to play and relax, and takes him back to the fire station.

■ **In court:** To avoid arousing sympathy or unduly influencing the jury, the dog is hidden from view behind a screen but stationed within reach of the alleged victim, should he or she want to pet him.



