

New Leash on Life USA: A Circle of Second Chances

Whitney M. Webber 29 November 2015



Introduction

It costs Philadelphia taxpayers \$500 million a year to imprison the roughly 10,000 inmates throughout the Philadelphia Prison System (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 2005; Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). Even if they are released, 50% end up right back in the system a few years later (R. Rosa, personal communication, November 2014).

Roughly one-third of the city's 30,000 homeless animals are euthanized every year (Animal Care and Control Team 2014), many of them former pets whose owners could no longer care for them.

Marian V. Marchese, founder and CEO of New Leash on Life USA, has found an innovative way for these two underserved and often mistreated populations, inmates and homeless dogs, to save each other's lives. By teaching inmates how to care for and train abandoned dogs, not only will the dogs get adopted and make a positive difference in the lives of Philadelphia families, but the inmates, who connect with the abandoned animals in a deeper way than they do with authority figures, acquire necessary skills for employment upon their release from prison.

Background

Ms. Marchese's passion for animals drove her to volunteer at Philadelphia Animal Care and Control (now ACCT [Animal Care and Control Team] Philly) for years, where she witnessed over 10,000 cats and dogs being euthanized annually due to lack of space and funding. This heartbreaking cycle is one she wanted to break on a larger scale while also doing some good for people. New Leash on Life USA (New Leash) was born out of a desire to improve the quality of life for these two misunderstood populations.

New Leash is a unique prison dog training program that saves dogs that are deemed unadoptable and scheduled to be euthanized by recruiting inmates in the Philadelphia Prison System to train and socialize them to enhance their adoptability, while simultaneously providing the inmates

with the necessary skills to achieve employment upon their release. Compared with other dog training programs that focus solely on the canine outcomes, New Leash is equally invested in the human component and is dedicated to helping inmate participants take an active role in changing their lives for the better. The organization even tracks its graduates upon completion of the program to monitor success rates.

In order to accomplish its impressive objectives, New Leash works within a preapproved curriculum through two programs that provide:

- Dog crates, toys, leashes, medications, etc.
- Professional dog trainers to coach inmates twice a week
- A dedicated professional staff of full-time employees and contracted professionals (no volunteers work inside the prison)
- A veterinary technician on call for medical emergencies and to educate inmates on good canine health regimens and the consequences of puppy mills, over-breeding and dog fighting
- Guest speakers, including a Humane Society officer to reiterate the repercussions of dog fighting
- JEV human service workshops for nine hours a week to teach job and interview skills
- Pennsylvania Prison Society workshops for nine hours a week to teach life and teamwork skills, as well as anger management counseling

- Reentry program services to help qualified inmates get paid sixty-day internships and a dedicated case manager who assists them in securing employment within the first ninety days of their release.

New Leash Takes Shape

In order to have the greatest impact, Ms. Marchese called upon her extensive network, one she developed over twenty years running a for-profit company, to get ideas and feedback from within the system she was hoping to change. Many of these people were those she had helped throughout her career and were more than happy to return the favor. Her major takeaway was: "Be nice to everyone. Help people and you will reap the benefits when you need them."

After approaching various prisons and not getting the commitment she was hoping for, Ms. Marchese was thrilled to meet Commissioner Louis Giorla, Philadelphia's commissioner of prisons, who was eager to get the program started. After approaching the director of Philadelphia Animal Control to determine what canine participation would be, Ms. Marchese set out to get the funding necessary to start a pilot program.

As New Leash started to take shape, Ms. Marchese and her team noticed that parolees had little to no post-release support. The city agency responsible for handling the inmates' reintegration into society lacked the

resources to provide services that New Leash felt were necessary. Ms. Marchese ultimately saw this as an important public safety issue because the first ninety days after release are the hardest for returning citizens to overcome (personal communication, October 2014). If this population isn't supported, they are often a danger to the city and to themselves.

With ten dedicated staff and contractors, and two program offerings, New Leash on Life USA provides weekly professional training sessions, job and life skill workshops, internship opportunities and post-parole support in order to assist inmates in learning the necessary skills for future employability. Inmates also acquire a sense of responsibility and fulfillment in that they are able to give back to society by caring for and training their canine charges. Through a new program, the organization hopes to start training service dogs to support those with autism and depression and veterans with PTSD. Communications between correctional officers and inmates has even improved.

High-Impact Leadership

It is in large part Ms. Marchese's vision and leadership that have allowed this wonderful organization to have such an impact. 128 inmates and sixty dogs have graduated from the program since 2011, and twenty-six men are now employed full-time.

Despite her success, Ms. Marchese is the first person to note that she didn't get here on her own. She credits her hands-off leadership style for allowing the organization to really take off. She hires passionate professionals and gets out of the way to let them do their work. By not micromanaging, valuing their creativity and problem-solving abilities and expecting the best, she always gets 150% from her staff.

After only three years in business, New Leash on Life USA is already a high-impact nonprofit. While they don't have the resources to officially advocate at a policy level, Ms. Marchese and her team promote the organization within Philadelphia and ultimately envision a state, and a possible national, advocacy role in the organization's future. They serve the Philadelphia prison community as well as Philadelphia citizens by equipping parolees with the necessary skills to give back to society upon their release from prison, and by providing family and assistance dogs.

The organization's list of local partners is astounding, and not only do these connections help to lower costs for the organization, they also illustrate its ever-expanding network of supporters; New Leash's dedicated following of devotees is where the majority of their funding comes from. Ms. Marchese also loves to collaborate and partner: "Anything that helps dogs, New Leash wants to be involved with."

Finally, the organization is highly adaptable, as evidenced by the development of its reentry program¹ after recognizing that post-parole support was sorely lacking and leading to a higher recidivism rate. The fact that New Leash can count the Philadelphia Prison Commissioner as one of its biggest fans is a testament to the program's dedication to its cause and its ability to make meaningful connections and provide quality work.

Ms. Marchese's key to success is: "Do what you love; nothing less." She encourages nonprofit leaders to "surround [themselves] with people who believe in [them], but will also be honest, [and to] block out the naysayers." She considers New Leash's work to date to be a success because she and her team have done just that, while also creating a space for homeless dogs and Philadelphia inmates to assist each other in returning to their city once again.

References:

Animal Care and Control Team. 2014. Statistics and reports. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved from <http://www.acctphilly.org/about/statistics/>.

City of Philadelphia Office of the Mayor. n.d. Mayor's Office of Re-Entry for Ex-Offenders: Backgrounder for mayoral candidates. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved from http://pdn.philly.com/nm_contest/documents/20070504_Info_pack_for_re_entry.pdf.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. 2015. Misplaced priorities: Philadelphia, PA. Baltimore, MD. Retrieved from: <http://www.naacp.org/pages/philadelphia>.

The Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. Pew study: Philadelphia's jail population drive largely by individuals held pretrial (Press release). Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Research Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/about/news-room/press-releases/2010/05/17/pew-study-philadelphias-jail-population-driven-largely-by-individuals-held-pretrial>.

Whitney M. Webber received her bachelor's degree in European history from Duke University in 2006. After working on Capitol Hill and in higher education policy, she returned to school to pursue her passion for the environment and wildlife. She received her certificate in nonprofit administration from Penn's Fels Institute of Government in 2014 and will receive her master's degree in environmental studies, resource management, from the University of Pennsylvania in May 2015.