

## Justice Heals: Human-Animal Interventions for Survivors of Sexual Assault



**Cohort:**  
2019-2022

**Team Members:**  
Megan Spedoske, LMSW  
Tana Fedewa, LMSW  
Marie Hopfensperger, BS, DVM

**Location:**  
East Lansing, Michigan

**Focus Areas:**  
Behavioral and Mental Health  
One Health  
Violence & Trauma

### Short Project Summary

Justice Heals is focused on developing a "One Welfare" animal assisted therapy (AAT) model, which will pair screened, shelter dogs with sexual assault survivors at Michigan State University. The team is developing and evaluating screening tools to select dogs who are capable and comfortable candidates for AAT, as well as developing AAT curricula for both the survivors and dogs to ensure programming that benefits both human and animal participants. The team anticipates determining whether this model is effective and replicable in other communities.

### Wicked Problem Description

While the Michigan State University (MSU) community has been particularly devastated by notorious sexual misconduct and institutional betrayal, U.S. campus statistics reflect a national crisis of sexual assault. One in five women and one in 16 men experience sexual violence during their college careers. Survivors of sexual crimes experience greater risks for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide. As such, it is important to expand

therapeutic options and a sense of community for our survivor population in order to foster a Culture of Health. To address this, our team is in the process of developing a "One Welfare" animal assisted therapy (AAT) program, Justice Heals, to offer an additional healing modality for the MSU survivor community, while concurrently serving shelter dogs from our greater Ingham County community.

## **Strategies Your Team is Undertaking**

### **Current Actions**

Animal behavior experts on our team are developing and will be evaluating screening methodology to select dogs who are capable and comfortable candidates for AAT. Our animal behavior and human mental health experts are also collaborating to create skills-based AAT curricula for both the survivors and dogs to ensure programming that benefits both human and animal participants: a truly "One Welfare" approach.

### **Future Actions**

A pilot project will get underway in January 2021 to determine if our screening methodology can identify shelter dogs who can work in AAT successfully and without stress in AAT. Adoptable dogs at 3 to 4 area shelters will be screened for our pilot project. Enrolled dogs and owners will be followed out post-adoption and after a 4- to 6-week training curriculum. We will be evaluating the physiologic effects and behavioral performance of participant dogs working with familiar and non-familiar humans. Our pilot project also aims to ascertain behavioral stability of recently adopted shelter dogs during the first two to three months in the new household to help us determine if and/or how long dogs need to reside in a foster home prior to AAT enrollment.

Our human mental health team members have developed concepts for a 6-week, skills-based AAT curriculum. Topics to be addressed include: an introduction to AAT; understanding canine body language and the differences between commands and cues; concepts of choice and control for both human and animal participants; grounding, coping, and self-soothing; boundaries and assertiveness; clear communication; body scanning; facets of wellness; and planning for continued healing. The animal behavior experts will be working closely with our human mental health team members to integrate these concepts into curricula for both human and canine participants. Our goal will be to recruit a summer 2021 pilot group of three to four survivor-dog whose AAT experience will be supported by a social worker (LMSW) and a licensed veterinary technician (LVT).

# Outcomes

## Completed Outcomes

Our team has been able to hire a 50% LMSW and a 50% LVT with specific animal behavior expertise to develop and implement programming. Dr. Hopfensperger worked with MSU general council and Ingham County Animal Control & Shelter (ICACS) to develop an MOU for programming. As a team, we have embarked on communication planning and social media engagement. In September, Ms. Spedoske was accepted and enrolled in the Center for Human Animal Interventions (CHAI) certificate program at Oakland University. This fall, Dr. Hopfensperger and her collaborator, Dr. Jacobs, have received IACUC and IRB approval to implement a pilot project to evaluate our canine participant screening methodology.

## Anticipated Future Outcomes

Justice Heals will be to develop a mutually beneficial program for survivors and shelter dogs improve access to behavioral care for both populations. Justice Heals will offer a new modality, which may engage survivors who may not otherwise seek traditional treatment and provide behavioral healthcare for dogs within our county that might not otherwise have access to such resources. Long-term outcomes include increased numbers of survivors served and canines enrolled in programming.

## Timeline

### Year Two

- During the spring semester 2021, we will implement our pilot project for selecting shelter dogs for AAT (see future actions above for further information).
- During the summer semester 2021, we plan to pilot a 6-week, psychoeducational AAT curricula, with canine selection informed by our spring semester pilot. During and at the end of the pilot we will survey participants. In August 2021, we will review our summer cohort results, so that fall programming can be informed and enhanced based upon the pilot cohort's experiences.

### Year Three

- By fall semester 2021, we will be embarking on our first full cohort of six to 12 dyads as informed by our pilot AAT intervention cohort.
- In addition to ongoing programming and assessments, year three will focus on solidifying long-term partnerships and development strategies for sustainability in our community, as well as create and distribute information for other communities and campus populations to pursue similar programming.

## Partnerships

Our team is currently partnering with Ingham County Animal Control & Shelter; we are also building working relationships with three additional sheltering organizations in the area. Dr. Hopfensperger is collaborating with Dr. Jacqueline Jacobs from the MSU Animal Sciences department to develop animal programming and assessments. Drs. Hopfensperger and Jacobs are mentoring an Animal Science master's student whose thesis will be based upon our programming and its outcomes. We are also be working in concert with team members at MSU Center for Survivors.

## Evaluation Strategies

As we hypothesize that Justice Heals will create mutually beneficial (i.e., One Welfare) outcomes, we will track markers of emotional health for all engaged survivors and enrolled dogs. Survivors' experiences with AAI will be measured via standardized assessments, including the PCL-5 (trauma scale) and Quality of Life (QoL) scale. Survivors' self-reported feelings of connectedness, empowerment, and sense of purpose will be tracked. Dogs' measures of behavioral health will be measured through use of physiologic markers, including heart rate and variability, locomotor activity, and salivary levels of cortisol, and oxytocin. We will utilize all these outcome measures to determine best practices for MSU, as well as to guide replication of the model in other communities.

## Contact Person Information

Name: Dr. Marie Hopfensperger, DVM, DACVB

Title: Assistant Professor

Dept/Unit/Office: College of Veterinary Medicine / Large Animal Clinical Sciences

Organization: Michigan State University

Email: hopfens1@msu.edu