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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**STATE ATTORNEY AYALA LAUNCHES A PET THERAPY PROGRAM  
FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

*Researchers and experts agree that pets excel as therapeutic agents, and that dogs are an antidote to depression. Studies have shown a decrease in both blood pressure and stress levels during therapy dog visits.*

**ORLANDO, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018** – The effects of domestic violence and sexual assault on survivors can be profound and long lasting. Survivors have many ways to remove physical evidence of abuse. But healing the emotional effects of abuse can be more challenging. Survivors of abuse often shut down emotionally and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, low self-esteem, and question their sense of self, and find it difficult to talk about the trauma they have experienced.

Support animals play a significant role in helping to heal the emotional wounds of domestic violence, sexual assault & human trafficking victims. One option for survivors who are in the process of healing from abuse is working with a therapy or comfort dog. Therapy dogs are special employees, they are working dogs or dogs with jobs. These dogs undergo special obedience training and certification to provide emotional support and comfort for a wide variety of people. Additionally, therapy dogs are tested for both obedience and temperament. A therapy dog can provide comfort to people in various settings, from shelters to courtrooms.

Research shows that when a person interacts with, or even is simply in the presence of, a friendly dog, there are immediate changes in their physiological responses. Their breathing becomes more regular, heart beat slows, muscles relax and other physiological changes suggest a lowering of sympathetic nervous system activity. Experts agree that pets excel as therapeutic agents and that dogs are an antidote to depression. Studies have also shown a decrease in victim's blood pressure and stress levels during therapy dog visits. A visit from a therapy dog can break the daily routine, increase overall emotional well-being, and stimulate the mind in dramatic ways. One researcher recalls that his patients seemed more willing to talk openly when a therapy dog was in the room. They were also more willing to talk about deeply painful issues. The positive results were not limited only to children, but also were seen in adults.

Certified therapy dogs offer so many wonderful benefits to people of all ages such as:

- Bringing joy and laughter, even if for a short time
- Taking a person's mind off of personal problems, aches, pains and worries
- Getting people to share their emotions and stories
- Giving a chance for people to communicate with others
- Lowering stress levels and blood pressure
- Rekindling warm memories of their pets

The State Attorney's Office is excited to introduce "Justice" and "Peace Comfort Dog", who are therapy and comfort dogs, to the domestic violence unit and the sex crimes unit in our office. They will assist victims as they tell their stories and provide comfort to them.

In fact, pet therapy has become much more prevalent from years ago. In the 1980's, there were less than twenty pet therapy programs nationwide; but by year 2000, there were over a thousand pet therapy programs in operation. The number of pet therapy dogs have gone up dramatically, both inside and outside of the courtroom assisting victims.

According to Canine Court Companion Program, which allows professionally trained dogs inside the courtroom, the demand for pet therapy has become widespread in recent years. Canine Court Companion Program is currently active in the Ninth Judicial Circuit and estimates that there are 187 dogs working in 38 states through their program alone.

The State Attorney's Office Therapy dogs are:

- ***Certified***
- ***Licensed***
- ***Insured***



**Justice** is a 4-year-old German Shephard assigned to our Domestic Violence Unit and will visit once a week to assist domestic violence victims.





**Peace Comfort Dog** is a 2-year-old Golden Retriever and is assigned to our Sex Crimes Unit and will visit one day every other week to assist victims of sexual assault and human trafficking.

