Is the Bark Worth The Buck?

Facility dogs, victim disclosure, and police officer wellness

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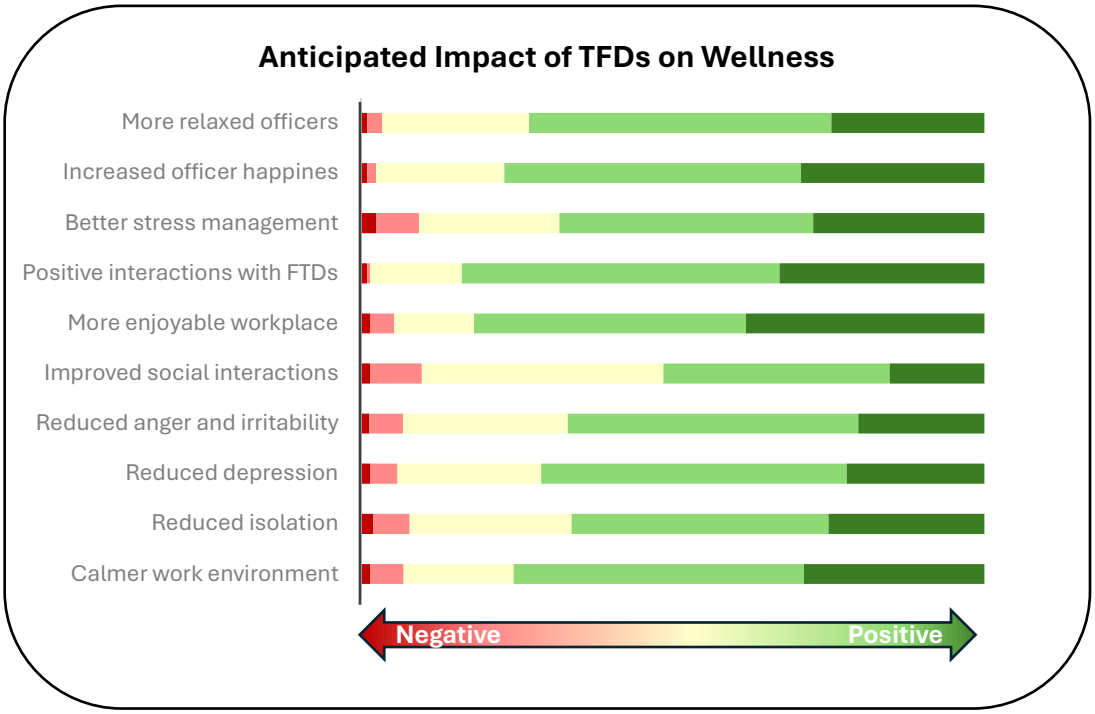
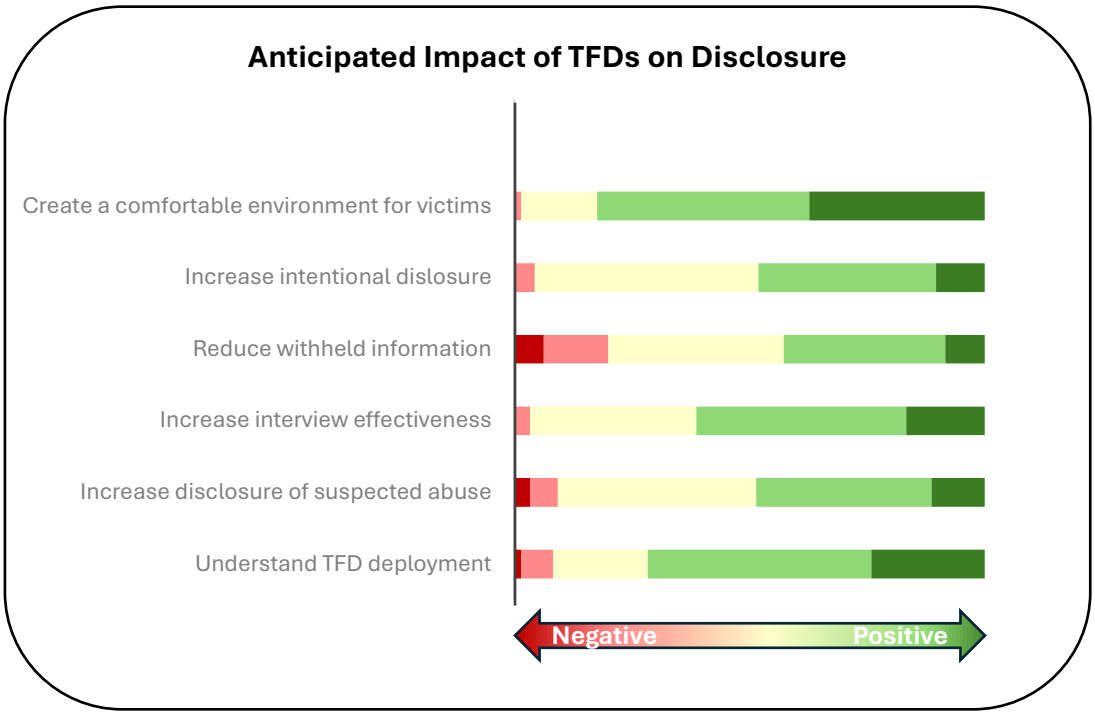
Research across diverse fields, ranging from education to emergency medicine, corrections, and other legal contexts, supports the therapeutic benefits of animal companionship, particularly in high-stress, trauma-informed environments. Therapy/ facility dogs (TFDs) are increasingly used as part of animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) to support individuals navigating stressful and potentially (re)traumatizing experiences within the legal and law enforcement systems. The use of AAIs aligns with trauma-informed approaches, including principles such as safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. Law enforcement personnel may view TFD programs as positive and non-threatening to participate in, as well as easy to access; all factors that can function as barriers for officer engagement in mental wellness resources. Another key focus of TFDs involves child and adult victims of abuse, where trauma-informed practices can help ensure victims have the ability to cope with the emotional effects of their victimization.

Online, self-report surveys were sent to handlers at police agencies that had facility dogs trained through DogTrainerUS, LLC. The survey was shared with *all* individuals that had daily contact with the dog, not just the primary handler for the dog. The survey included fifty-three questions and focused on five key areas: 1) Facility Dog Impact on Officer Wellness, 2) Facility Dog Return on Investment, 3) Facility Dog Impact on Disclosure, 4) Personal demographic information, and 5) Canine exposure. More information about the questions can be found at the end of this brief.

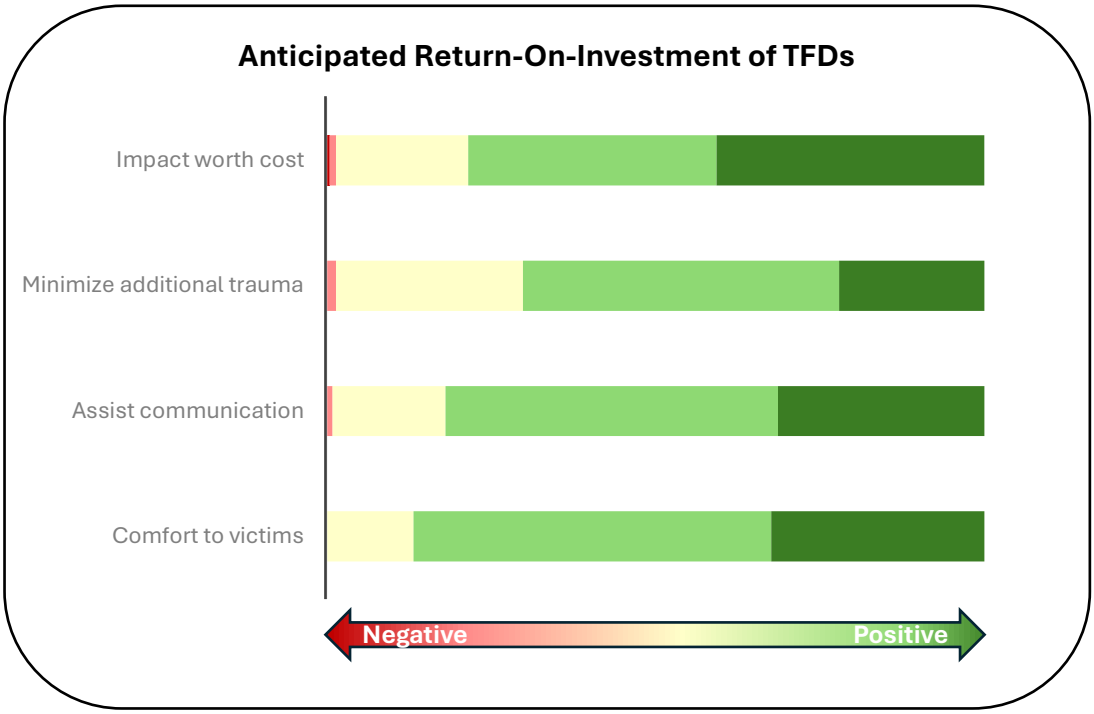
Over 70% of respondents indicated that facility dogs will also create a relaxed environment and ease depression. When individual questions regarding TFD impact on officer wellness are examined, officers' support becomes even clearer – most support the notion that TFD presence would be an asset to officer wellness. Specifically, officers suggested that TFDs will create calmer and more relaxed environments, decrease anger, irritability, depression, and isolation, as well as enhance the quality of social interactions between officers as well as other staff.



Approximately 60% of officers indicated that facility dogs may increase children's likelihood to respond to questioning about victimization. Less than half believed that service dogs would impact intentional disclosure alone. Over 80% of officers indicated that facility dogs will foster a comfortable environment for the children they interact with, and the majority of officers indicated that they believe that TFDs will increase the effectiveness of interviews with children who are the victims of crimes. While officers were relatively more mixed on the effectiveness of TFDs to garner disclosure that would otherwise not happen, those that did not were more likely to report that they did not understand or were unsure of the purpose or appropriate way to deploy a TFD.



Officers were highly supportive that TFDs would provide a good return-on-investment (ROI). Specifically, officers supported the notion that TFDs would bring comfort to child victims of crime, minimize additional trauma or secondary victimization inherent in the interview process, and assist in communicating with traumatized children. Last, 78% of officers indicated that they agreed TFDs were worth the time and monetary impact associated with their deployment. Unsurprisingly, those who disagreed with this statement were substantially more likely to indicate they had a poor understanding of the purpose of and how to deploy TFDs. Further those who saw benefits of TFDs where officer wellness and crime victim disclosure are concerned were substantially more likely to indicate that the deployment of TFDs was worth associated costs. Additional factors also increased support for the ROI of TFDs. Notably, female officers were more likely to indicate TFDs were worth the associated costs. Further, so did officers with higher levels of education (this effect increased with education level).



There are several important takeaways from this study. First, officers largely support TFDs as tools to promote and increase officer wellness. This is especially important given that staff buy-in is critical to leveraging any new tool within law enforcement organizations. Second, officers perceptions of the use of TFDs to aid in the disclosure of crimes by child victims of crime is more mixed but associated to some degree with officers' understanding of the TFD purpose and appropriate deployment. This may be for several reasons. Notably, poor officer understanding of the TFD mission may also be associated with a lack of understanding the mechanisms by which TFD's have experienced success in the field. Second, most canines in police service are focused on missions

Key Takeaways

1. Officers strongly support the use of TFDs to promote officer wellness.
2. Officers provide mixed support regarding the use of TFDs in interviewing crime victims.
3. Organizational buy-in for TFDs should focus on education officers on the TFD mission and appropriate deployment.

involving criminal apprehension or drug interdiction, and this mission set has experienced a normalization which TFDs have not. The simple fact that this mission is newer and there is a lack of current rigorous evaluations on their effects may make officers less likely to provide buy-in. If agencies are to increase officer buy-in and utilization of TFDs there is a need to focus on socializing and educating officers where the TFD mission-set is concerned. Despite this, there is a compelling case for officers believing TFDs provide a good ROI both where interviewing crime victims and officer wellness is concerned. In short, most officers do believe that ***the bark is worth the bite***.