

HighLife



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MEET FRAISER THE FACILITY DOG

River Bridge Regional Center has a Labrador retriever on its team

By Kim Fuller
Special to the Daily

Imagine being a child in an intense state of stress, when your nervous system is saying you're in danger, but then a calm dog sits still without worry at your feet. Dogs generally alert or respond when something seems threatening, so this calming energy may show you that a situation is safe.

Frasier, a 4-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, serves this purpose for River Bridge Regional Center in Glenwood Springs. He is a type of service dog known as a facility dog, or a courthouse dog, with a job to make children feel as comfortable as possible in stressful situations.

River Bridge Regional Center is a nationally accredited nonprofit child advocacy center that focuses on the prevention, assessment, treatment and investigation of child abuse. There are 13 children advocacy centers in the state of Colorado. River Bridge Regional Center is the closest to the Vail Valley and is the children advocacy center for Eagle County, as well as Pitkin, Garfield and Rio Blanco counties.

"When children have to face their offender for the first time, it's obviously really terrifying," said Meghan Backofen, mental health specialist at River Bridge and Frasier's handler. "And very often the parents aren't allowed to be in the courtroom. It's a really uncomfortable and stressful situation for children anyway, and they often don't have support people in the courtroom with them."

The idea behind a courthouse dog is the dog can be with the child as they testify to help soothe them and give them support.

"There's a lot of evidence that it decreases blood pressure, reduces heart rate, reduces cortisol levels and so not only is it a really nice thing to support

the child, parents feel better about having their kid alone in the courtroom with a dog with them, somebody with them," Backofen said. "In addition to all that good stuff, there is actually physiological scientific rationale behind it."

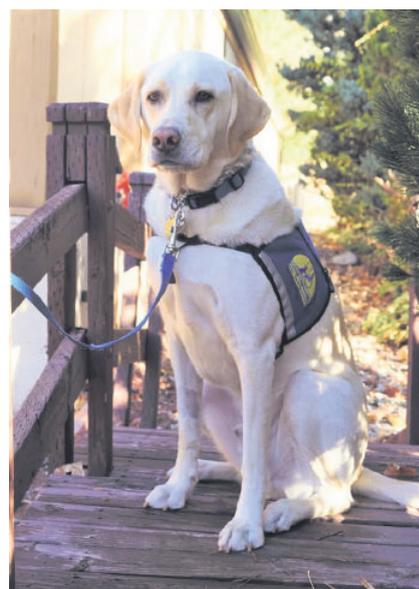
'CALM AND NEUTRAL PRESENCE'

Frasier had an extensive two-year training to fulfill this role, and he's been working at River Bridge Regional Center for two years. Backofen had training as well, and she and Frasier both have to be retested every year. In addition to accompanying children as they testify in court, Frasier is available during forensic interviews, as well as therapy sessions.

"Forensic interviews are the first time the child discloses about abuse," Backofen said. "Frasier sits in with them if the child wants him to, and 90 percent of the time they do."

A visit to the children's advocacy center is generally one that kids don't look forward to, but Backofen said Frasier seems to soften that resistance.

"When they come in and see a dog here, it usually changes their opinion of the place," she said. "It doesn't seem



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Frasier, along with his owner, Meghan Backofen, had an extensive two-year training to fulfill this role, and he's been working at River Bridge Regional Center in Glenwood for two years.



nearly as scary, and it just makes it seem a little friendlier here."

Backofen leads therapy sessions with children, and she said that Frasier is a really "calming and consistent force."

Victoria Chester, a board member for River Bridge Regional Center, said Frasier's job is to comfort and befriend the children the facility helps.

"His calm and neutral presence help children through the initial disclosure, therapy and even in the courtroom," Chester said. "Frasier works hard to ensure the children feel safe and relaxed here at River Bridge. We are lucky to have him as part of the River Bridge team."

ON AND OFF DUTY

Frasier is vested while he's working, but when he goes home with Backofen and she removes his vest, Frasier is "a totally different dog."

"He's a typical crazy lab," she said. "Sometimes he's pretty rambunctious and he has a lot of fun."

At work, however, Backofen said Frasier is not like a normal lab in that "he can be trained to be kind of like a doormat, he just lies there completely still, having no reaction."

Any time Frasier goes to court,

Backofen goes with him as his handler. As of now, the 5th Judicial District hasn't trained to use Frasier yet, but Backofen said she hopes the district will participate soon.

"Our advocacy center serves your area, so a child that has had a forensic interview, if they have come to River Bridge, they mostly likely have used Frasier," Backofen said. "So to have him available to testify in court is definitely a huge bonus for them. I certainly am open to using him there, but we have to figure out how we can make that happen."

River Bridge Regional Center is holding an event with Marilyn Van Derbur on Wednesday, Oct. 11, at the TimberHearth in Cordillera. Van Derbur is the former Miss America, an inspirational speaker and childhood incest survivor. Tickets are \$75 and all proceeds benefit local child sexual assault survivors; visit www.riverbridgerc.org for tickets.

"We really want to do whatever we can for families that we serve to reduce the stress of an investigation," Backofen said, "and Frasier is that additional component."

For more information on River Bridge Regional Center, visit www.riverbridgerc.org.

A visit to the children's advocacy center is generally one that kids don't look forward to, but Frasier — a type of service dog known as a courthouse dog — helps children feel as safe and comfortable as possible in a stressful situation.

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