

# The power of puppies for mental health

August 14 2015

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When Thava Mahadevan, MS, Director of Operations at the UNC Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health, noticed that a significant number of his clients with mental illness suffered poor overall health, he sought simple solutions to help them. In 2012, one of those solutions, The Farm at Penny Lane, in Pittsboro, North Carolina, six miles east of the UNC campus, was developed. The farm, which sits on 40 acres, contains a community garden, and it quickly became a place

where his clients could grow healthy and affordable food while leading more active and social lives. Full of volunteers, staff and clients, The Farm at Penny Lane is a vibrant, welcoming community.

But Thava has never been one to settle. In 2014, he wanted to add more innovative and positive forms of therapy to the [farm](#). Partnering with Paws4People in Wilmington, North Carolina, Thava started UNC PAWS. The Puppy Development Center launched soon after. Through this program, Sunny Westerman and her team of volunteers and clients train [puppies](#) (6 – 16 weeks old) for 10 weeks. They socialize the puppies, introducing them to people, places, and experiences they may encounter during their lives. For Sunny, this is the best job in the world. After they have completed the 10 weeks at the Puppy Development Center at the farm, the puppies are taken to a women's prison in West Virginia where they are formally trained as service dogs. During their training, the puppies live with the prisoners in their cells until they are matched with a veteran suffering from PTSD. The puppies have been trained specifically for their human match and have developed an amazing ability to serve and improve the life of the veteran.

The Farm at Penny Lane continues to grow, and while the farm does not currently have a residential facility, a new project for building "Tiny Homes" for affordable housing on the property is on the horizon. If you love these puppies, you can find them on the farm or sometimes visiting locations such as Weaver Street Market and local fire and police stations. If you see them, help socialize them and amp up your oxytocin levels at the same time. In the meantime, check out this video and see if you're not smiling at the end!



Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

Citation: The power of puppies for mental health (2015, August 14) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-08-power-puppies-mental-health.html>

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