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Contact: Eddie Lard | 205-746-3274 | eddie@dcwins.com

## **Alabama DA Association and Office of Prosecution Services Announce Expansion of Facility Dog Program Throughout State**

*Alabama Is National Leader in Use of Facility Dogs to Comfort Victims of Crime*

MONTGOMERY, Ala. – Willow is a 7-year-old, black Labrador mix with midnight dark eyes and a quiet, calm disposition. Her favorite thing to do is to sit and, oftentimes, lie quietly next to the feet of her human companion and perhaps enjoy a gentle pat or soothing rub.

For those qualities, she spends a lot of her time each week in court or interview rooms. Willow, though, is not a crime dog – at least not in the sense of McGruff the TV crime dog. But Willow is, you might say, an officer of the court, and she plays a critical role in bringing justice to crime victims and their offenders.

Willow is a facility dog, well-trained to be a calming presence for traumatized victims. She is at their feet when they must replay to the court or investigators the painful, heartbreaking stories of their physical or sexual assault. Most often, these are children who need a friendly, furry companion to feel relax enough to open up about the horrors they experienced.

And Willow is a first – the first dog in Alabama entrusted with and trained to handle such responsibility.

“The training starts at birth,” Tamara Martin, special projects coordinator for the state’s Office of Prosecution Services and Willow’s five-year pal and handler, said of the process facility dogs go through before being certified for court. “They are conditioned to handle the stress, loud noises and things other dogs would consider threatening. They are trained to associate certain sounds with pleasure rather than sounds they should be afraid of.”

Willow is no longer alone as the only dog certified to work with crime victims in Alabama. Four other facility dogs are now on the job. They will be joined by two additional dogs in August. Within a year, there could be as many as 12 trained and certified dogs assisting crime victims, spread throughout the state, the ADAA and OPS announced this week at a press conference at the Montgomery County Courthouse.

What started as a one-person mission, with Martin self-funding the care and handling of Willow, got a major boost this year when OPS was awarded a \$700,00 Victims of Crime Act grant through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. The grant is for one year, but is renewable.

Another big contributor to the success of the program is Canine Companions for Independence, a national nonprofit that provides the dogs and trains them. Training for each dog costs about \$50,000, according to Martin. Canine Companions places the dogs free of charge.

In addition to Willow, who is based in Montgomery, facility dogs are currently operating out of Dothan, Clanton, Phenix City and Huntsville. Next month, Lauderdale County and Shelby County will get dogs. Etowah, Covington, Baldwin, Tallapoosa and Morgan counties could get dogs within a year, according to Trisha Mellberg, deputy executive for the OPS and the DA Association.

“These dogs are amazing,” Mellberg said. “We applied for the ADECA grant because we have seen how these dogs help victims as they have to relive the very worst moments of their lives. It’s hard especially for children to talk about what happened to them to strangers. These dogs put them at ease so they are comfortable enough to tell about their experiences.”

ADAA and OPS Executive Barry Matson applauds Martin, Mellberg, Canine Companions and Gov. Kay Ivey, whose office presented the grant, for making the program and its expansion possible.

“This puts Alabama at the very forefront when it comes to assisting visitors in the courtroom as well as when they are interviewed by police and prosecutors,” Matson said. “Other states have looked at what we are doing with the dogs and want to copy it. We even had a visitor from Australia who came here last year to see what we are doing in order to help them with their start-up program.”

Shelby County District Attorney Jill Lee, president of the Alabama District Attorneys Association, is one of the DAs whose circuit is getting a dog next month.

“We are just thrilled,” Lee said. “We’ve seen Willow in action in Shelby County and witnessed firsthand what a difference she made with the victims. This grant means not only our circuit, but others across Alabama as well, will have these wonderful friends of the court available when needed.”

The program is named Helping Every Survivor Realize Their Opportunity and Strength – HERO.

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